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I will not let you go until you bless me : an exploratory study of Gay Christian men's integration of religious and sexual identities

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John P. Reardon
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Bless Me: An Exploratory Study of
Gay Christian Men's Integration of
Religious and Sexual Identities

Abstract

Eleven self-identified gay Christian men were interviewed regarding the process by which they integrated their gay and Christian identities. The data revealed that they experienced a three-phase process The first phase, Initial Dissonance, occurred as their emerging gay identities came into conflict with the conservative Christian churches to which they belonged. Participants experienced both implicit and explicit rejection. Some isolated themselves in order to avoid rejection. The second phase consisted of an Initial Response to the dissonance. Responses included compartmentalized homosexual experimentation, attempts to reject the gay identity through suppression of sexual desires, reparative therapy, and participation in Ex-Gay ministries. When participants found that these responses did not sufficiently relieve the dissonance they experienced, they moved on to the third phase, Integration Negotiation. In this phase, they attempted to find a way to uphold both gay and Christian identities. Common aspects of Integration Negotiation were the ability to separate their Christian faith from belonging to particular churches, engagement in personal study, attitudinal changes, and development of a capacity to arrive at a gay-affirming theological stance. The narrative data affirmed the literature that suggests that sexual and religious identities are "core identities" (Thumma, 1991), and participants described working out the relative weight they gave to their gay and Christian identities. Participants also reported a sense of mission to the gay community, the Christian community, or both. They described integration as an ongoing process.

I WILL NOT LET YOU GO UNTIL YOU BLESS ME:

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF GAY CHRISTIAN MEN'S INTEGRATION OF

RELIGIOUS AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work

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2011

Acknowledgements

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Chapter I

Introduction

The Book of Genesis tells the story of the patriarch Jacob wrestling with a mysterious

being who is sometimes described as a man, sometimes as an angel, and sometimes as God (Gen.

32: 23-32). Jacob is preparing to encounter the brother whom he earlier cheated out of his

birthright and fears what the meeting will bring. In the dark of the night, the match begins:

> Then some man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When the man saw that he
>
> could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket was
>
> wrenched as they wrestled. The man then said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But
>
> Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." "What is your name?" the man
>
> asked. He answered, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob
>
> but Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have
>
> prevailed." . . . Jacob named the place Peniel, "Because I have seen God face to face," he
>
> said, "yet my life has been spared." At sunrise, as he left Penuel, Jacob limped along
>
> because of his hip (Gen. 32: 23-29, 31-32).

Through his struggle and demand for blessing, Jacob receives both a new name and an ongoing

wound. The name Jacob can mean "heel-gripper," a reference to Jacob's struggle with his older

twin even in the womb (Clifford and Murphy, 1992, p. 28). "Israel," on the other hand, refers to

a struggle with God (p. 34). From an ambitious and tricky man, Jacob has been transformed into

one who has engaged in an intimate struggle with God. From this struggle, he has found a new

kind of identity. At the same time, he is afflicted with a limp that illustrates the price of his efforts.

Over the years, great symbolic meaning has been found in this famous tale common to the three Abrahamic religions, and it has been used as an image of the experience of gay Christians (see, e.g., Wolkomir, 2001b). It takes on particular significance in this exploratory study of the lives of gay Christian men because it provides an image for the process of integrating two identities—one religious, the other sexual—when many Christians understand the two as being incompatible and disapprove of those who hold a positive gay identity. This study is based on narrative data provided by a sample of self-identified gay male Christians. The men studied here are people who have persevered in the process of integrating their gay and Christian identities. They appear to be saying to the faith tradition they have embraced what Jacob said to his mysterious opponent: "I will not let you go until you bless me." This study has sought to understand the process by which these men have integrated their gay and Christian identities, perhaps receiving in the process both a symbolic new name and a wound that bears witness to their struggle.

Stereotypes to the contrary, many gay people identify with religious traditions, including traditions that have been associated with a condemnatory attitude toward homosexuality. Rodriguez (2010) asserts that the social sciences are in the midst of a "paradigm shift" in which researchers are beginning "to consider homosexuals as spiritual and religious beings in their own right, rather than merely sexual beings needing to be compared and contrasted with religious others" (p. 8). This exploratory study focuses on the manner in which some members of one

subgroup of non-heterosexual people[1]—gay male Christians—respond to the intersection of their gay and Christian identities by taking up the task of integrating them.

As the literature indicates, there has been a great deal of research on the manner in which gay people have responded to the intersection of sexual and religious identities, often in the context of negative messages from Christian churches. This study seeks to contribute to that literature by gaining added insight into the experience of a specific group—self-identified gay male Christians who belong to the Gay Christian Network (GCN), a 15,000-member international online community (GCN, 2011; Lee, 2011).

A specific focus on this one exceptional cohort (an organized, virtual "network" of gay Christian men) permits a clearer and deeper exploration of the process by which some men have set about integrating their gay and Christian identities. Thus, this study seeks to shed light on the inner dynamic of integrating religious and non-heterosexual identity for one exceptional cohort, namely gay Christian men, in the hope of providing additional insight with which to interpret earlier research and to suggest further investigation that will exceed the scope of what is being considered here.

A clearer understanding of this sample's internal integration of sometimes outwardly conflicting religious and sexual identities can lead to more effective social work and pastoral practice at the micro level of therapeutic and pastoral relationships, at the mezzo level of support groups, community organizing, and church responses to LGBT-related issues, and at the macro

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[1] The term "non-heterosexual" is used here occasionally as an umbrella term to acknowledge that the task of addressing the intersection of a sexual or gender identity with a rejecting religious affiliation is not limited to gay Christian men and also because the literature on this subject uses inconsistent terminology, sometimes addressing the experiences of lesbian, bisexual or transgendered people and sometimes not, and on other occasions including descriptors such as "queer" or "questioning."

level of seeking to affect public and ecclesiastical policies in ways that advocate equitable treatment for non-heterosexual people.

The specific question of this study is: How do men who label themselves as both gay and Christian integrate their religious and sexual identities? A brief overview of the definitions of some major terms used in this study is in order here. "Identity" is used here to refer to a person's explicitly communicated self-understanding. The term "gay" is used as a self-descriptor by some non-heterosexual people. There are people who experience same-sex attractions and/or engage in homosexual sex who do not label themselves in that manner. A gay identity may or may not involve sexual activity. The term "gay" can represent identification both with a set of physical and emotional desires and with a community of others who share those desires (Alderson, 2003, pp. 78-80). The term "religious" here refers both to identification with a faith that has a communal and creedal nature and to the personal appropriation of that faith in one's private spiritual practices. Adopting a definition offered by Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), this study understands "integration" in the lives of gay Christian men as a reality in which these men hold a positive gay identity, a positive Christian identity, and do not feel conflict between the two (p. 334). The term "integration" implies a process that takes place over time, usually resulting in resolution and syntonicity. In contrast, "intersection" is used in this study to refer to the co-occurrence of Christianity and gayness in the same person, with the understanding that it may imply, even over time, non-integration, conflict and dystonicity.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

This study explores issues related to identity. Specifically, it seeks to understand the process by which some men, in this case 11 members of the Gay Christian Network (GCN), integrate both gay and Christian identities. GCN (2011) describes itself as "a nonprofit ministry supporting Christians worldwide who happen to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)." Its stated mission is "sharing Christ's light and love for all" (2011). GCN affirms the gay Christian identity. It does not promote a specific Christian view on same-sex sexual activity. Its website features material on "the great debate" between "Side A," which believes God blesses same-sex relationships, and "Side B," which believes that God calls gays and lesbians to sexual abstinence (GCN, 2011). An essay making the case for a scriptural mandate for each view is offered on the website (GCN, 2011).

Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) note that integration of gay and Christian identities is only one of a number of possible outcomes when Christianity and homosexuality intersect (Rodriguez and Ouellette, 2000). Other possibilities they identify include rejecting Christianity or all religion entirely, rejecting a gay identity, or compartmentalizing the sexual and religious aspects of one's life. In order to provide background for this study's exploration of the process by which some gay Christian men integrate their religious and sexual identities, the literature review that follows will first explore the concept of identity. Then it will examine theories on

the development of religious identity and gay identity. Finally, it will look at the co-occurrence of gayness and adherence to Christianity in light of the concepts of intersection and integration.

Identity

The literature on religious and sexual identity explains identity in terms of the complex interaction between one's understanding of oneself and one's self-presentation to others. For example, Thumma (1991) speaks of "core identity" as the interaction of a number of factors:

> The stability of core identity (or "master status" in Becker, 1963) resides in the interplay between one's continual experience of the world, the relative meaning assigned to such experiences, the plausibility of these meaning systems for ordering existence, and one's interaction with a significant "reference group" (Lofland, 1969). (Thumma, pp. 334-335).

Similarly, King & Smith (2004) speak of identity development as requiring one to "negotiate the difficult balance that must be struck between the imperative of being true to oneself and the desire to belong" (p. 968). According to Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, and Hampton (2008), it encompasses a variety of factors, including age, race, ethnicity, religion, spirituality, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. The development of identity is "an active process of exploring and assessing one's identity and establishing a commitment to an integrated identity" (p. 22). A stable, integrated identity is a sign of having developed what Tolpin (1971), citing Kohut (1971), refers to as a "cohesive self" (p. 317). Banai, Mikulincer, and Shaver (2005) explain the cohesive self in the following manner:

> [A] sense of self-cohesion—a sense that all features of one's personality are facets of a single, well-integrated structure—is achieved when people possess a stable, positively valued, and congruent set of qualities, ambitions, ideals, and values, and are able to

accomplish their goals without being rejected or isolated from significant others and important reference groups. Confidence about the acceptability and serviceability of one's personality, talents, and skills contributes to a cohesive, integrated self-structure that provides a subjective sense of sameness, stability, and permanence. This self-structure can maintain a sense of consistency and clarity of patterns of experiences and behaviors even under threatening conditions. Furthermore, it can provide a sense of inner security and resilience, calm a person in times of stress, and repair wounds to self-esteem inflicted by temporary failures, rejections, and disappointments (pp. 225-226).

This cohesive self reflects integration of the different facets of one's personal identity; it is the goal of the process of identity development.

Marcia (as cited in Worthington et al., 2008, p. 22) offers a model of ego identity development in which there are four possible statuses based upon levels of exploring and/or committing to possible identities: foreclosure (one makes a commitment without first exploring), moratorium (one refrains from commitment while exploring), achievement (one commits to an identity after exploring), and diffusion (a lack of either commitment or exploration). Using a more chronological approach, Erikson (as cited in Seiffge-Krenke, 2010, p. 389) offers a model of lifespan development that he divides into eight stages, each involving a crisis that has a positive or negative outcome, with mastery of the positive outcome required to move on to the next stage. Erikson's fifth stage, which he places in adolescence, is a crisis of identity versus role confusion (Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke, 2010, p. 389). Several studies have argued that social changes, including the often greater variety of potential identity options and also the prolonging of adolescence and the delay in adopting adult responsibilities that result from extended post-high school education, have moved the crisis of identity "well into

adulthood" (Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke, 2010, pp. 391-392; see also Worthington et al., 2008, p. 22).

According to a theory set forth by Loevinger (as cited in Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke, 2010, p. 390), "ego development serves as a mechanism to maintain coherence in one's identity, for instance, by mature impulse control, understanding oneself in relation to others, and experiencing oneself as a coherent self over time." Erikson argued that resolved identity is necessary in order for true human intimacy to flourish, a belief supported by the results of a 10-year longitudinal study of 93 participants by Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke (2010, pp. 389, 407-408).

Religious Identity

Literature on religious identity often points to it as something socially constructed and subject to ongoing development, though, as Leak (2009) notes, commitment can foreclose further exploration (pp. 204-205). Balkin et al. (2009), citing Griffith and Griggs (2001), define religious identity as "a process in which individuals explore and commit to a set of religious beliefs and/or practices" (p. 420). Bertram-Troost , de Roos, and Miedema (2006) define religious identity development as "[t]he totality of the gradual change in the content and strength of commitments in relation to the way one looks at life and the amount of exploration in the achievement and change of these commitments" (p. 311).

Literature suggests that it is important to distinguish conceptually between the terms "religion" and "spirituality." The terms "spiritual" and "religious" are both used in the literature on homosexuality and religion with generally overlapping but not always precisely identical (or even clearly articulated) meanings. As is apparent from the examples offered below, much of the literature distinguishes between religion and spirituality, with different definitions offered for

each term (e.g., Halkitis, Mattis, Sahadath, Massie, Ladyzhenskaya, Pitrelli, et al., 2009; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, and Quick, 2010). Sherry and her colleagues (2010) note that many of their respondents described themselves as spiritual but not religious, but the authors do not define those terms. Halkitis et al. (2009) understand religion as relating to communal worship and spirituality as the personal relationship to God and self.

Dahl and Galliher (2009) offer a very precise formulation of the spirituality-religion distinction. They refer to religion as "the organizational communal and individual search for the holy and/or sacred" and spirituality as "an individual search for deeper meaning" (p. 94). These definitions allow for the idea that personal spirituality can be developed, lived out, and expressed both within and apart from the communal beliefs and practices of a religious organization.

Religious identity can be measured both by commitment and by the level of faith development a person evinces. As faith develops, the way one experiences one's religious commitments and beliefs changes. Perhaps the best-known model of faith development was developed by James Fowler in the 1960s and 1970s; it was inspired in part by Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Fowler, 2004, pp. 408-410) and is also in debt to the thought of Jean Piaget (Fowler, 2004, p. 416). Similarly to Kohlberg's model, Fowler's posits an individual's move from a preconventional faith, in which one's ideas of God and faith are primitive and literal, through a conventional level at which one identifies with received religious teachings, structures, and community, to a postconventional level at which one can critique religious teachings and receive truth from religious heritages other than one's own (Harris, Cook, & Kashubeck-West, 2008; Leak, 2009, pp. 203-204). Fowler's theory is based on a conviction, in Leak's (2009) words, that "faith development is characterized by increasing complexity, differentiation, autonomy, humility, and activism in one's faith" (p. 203). This belief is

consonant with Erikson's writings on the topic of religious identity development. Leak (2009) summarizes Erikson's view as follows: "A healthy religiousness stems from a healthy personality, and both are characterized by ego transcendence and self-determined autonomy, whereas an unhealthy religious and personality development is characterized by dependency on the approval of others" (p. 202). Leak also observes that, for Erikson, "Mature faith is . . . characterized by a process of searching for ultimate truth, rather than the belief that one has found ultimate truth" (p.202).

Fowler (1984) sets forth a seven-stage schema of faith development. Stage one, Primal Faith, derives from a baby's "rudimentary but deep sense of the rhythms of intimacy and of the texture of his or her environment" (Fowler, 1984, p. 53). It reflects "the roots of confidence that find soil in the ecology of relations, care, and shared meanings that welcome a child and offset our profound primal vulnerability " (p. 53). The second stage, Intuitive-Projective Faith, begins about age two and involves an incipient awareness of death and of archetypal images such as God and the devil (pp. 53-55). The third stage is Mythic-Literal Faith. It begins about ages six or seven and coincides with the onset of what Piaget terms "concrete operational thinking" (p. 55). At this stage, faith "becomes a matter of reliance on the stories, rules, and implicit values of the family's community of meanings" as well as a reliance on the "stories, practices, and beliefs" of any broader tradition to which the family adheres (pp. 55-56). Fowler notes that adults may be operating at this stage or any of the subsequent ones (p. 57). Transition between the stages can be an occasion of loss and inner crisis as one leaves behind one way of looking at life and constructs a more sophisticated one using formal operational thinking (pp. 58-59).

Fowler's fourth stage, Synthetic-Conventional Faith, "is a synthesis of belief and value elements that are derived from one's significant others;" it is "deeply felt and strongly held; but it

has not yet become an object of (self) critical reflection and inquiry. In this stage one is *embedded* in her/his faith outlook and one's identity is derived from membership in a circle of face-to-face relations" (Fowler, 1984, p. 60; emphasis in original). The fifth stage is Individuative-Reflective Faith. It involves a critical examination of received teachings and a movement toward an individual stance:

> Two fundamental movements are at the heart of a transition to this stage: (1) There must
> be a shift in the sense of the grounding and orientation of the self. From a definition of
> self derived from one's relations and roles and the network of expectations that go with
> them, the self must now begin to be and act from a new quality of self-authorization.
> There must be the emergence of an "executive ego"—a differentiation of the self *behind*
> the personae (masks) one wears and the roles one bears, from the composite of roles and
> relations through which the self is expressed. (2) There must be an objectification and
> critical choosing of one's beliefs, values, and commitments, which come to be taken as a
> systemic unity. What were previously tacit and unexamined convictions and beliefs must
> now become matters of more explicit commitment and accountability (p. 62; emphasis in
> original).

This stage can develop in one's early twenties but it can also occur much later and might not occur at all (p. 63). Those who move on to the sixth stage, typically in mid-life or later, are said to experience Conjunctive Faith, which "involves the integration of elements in ourselves, in society, and in our experience of ultimate reality that have the character of being apparent contradictions, polarities, or at the least, paradoxical elements" (p. 65). Conjunctive Faith includes a "sense that truth is more multiform and complex than most of the clear, either-or categories of the Individuative stage can properly grasp" (p. 65). The seventh, and ultimate,

stage of Fowler's schema is Universalizing Faith, in which the ego is de-centered and one can appreciate a variety of perspectives of ultimate reality. It involves "a radical decentration from the self as a [*sic*] epistemological and valuational reference point for construing the world" (p. 69). One "decenters in the valuing process to such an extent that he/she participates in the valuing of the Creator and values other beings—and being—from a standpoint more nearly identified with the love of Creator for creatures than from the standpoint of a vulnerable, defensive, anxious creature" (p. 69). Thus, one can develop from a faith based on literalism, reliance on authority, and deference to community to a more critical stance that is personally formulated and validated by oneself, and then grow beyond that to the point where one lets go of the ego and fully appreciates multiplicity and complexity—even paradox—in the realm of religious belief.

Fowler's theory is well-known and has been well-received in many religious quarters, including Reform Jews, Catholics and many of the Oldline/Mainline Protestant denominations (e.g., Unitarian Universalists, United Methodists, liberal Baptists, Episcopalians and Disciples of Christ), all of which hold a relatively optimistic view of human nature and the capacity of reason despite the reality of original sin (Fowler, 2004, pp. 411-412). Despite this optimism, adherents of these traditions have cautioned "that human nature is 'fallen' and prone to selfdeception [*sic*] and moral complacency" and needs "the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in ongoing redemption, to offset the distorting and self-focused anxiousness that underlies our proneness to sin" (pp. 411-412). In contrast, groups like Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Orthodox Jews have had stronger reservations in light of their more pessimistic assessment of the possibilities of human nature (p. 412). Lutheranism and Presbyterianism represent forms of Protestantism that understand original sin to have more thoroughly corrupted human nature; therefore they emphasize "the

human proclivity to sin" (p. 412). This theological orientation makes them more cautious of any model based on a dynamic of growth (in contrast to a powerful divine intervention). Another criticism Fowler's schema has received in religious circles is that it can appear to value a growth process over the content of faith. Fowler denies this intention, stating that *"[i]t should never be the primary goal of religious education simply to precipitate and encourage stage advancement. . . . Movement in stage development, properly understood, is a byproduct of teaching the substance and the practices of faith"* (p. 417; emphasis in original).

A difficulty inherent in any psychological model of the workings of religious faith is that religions make claims regarding the nature of ultimate reality that can be neither verified nor falsified using the methodologies of either the hard sciences or the social sciences. Thus, if one is convinced that a particular belief is true, it can be understood to overrule human impulses toward growth (understood psychologically) or critical examination. This is particularly the case with religious fundamentalism. Harris et al. (2008), citing Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992), Clark and McKheen (1994), Fisher et al. (1994), Hunsberger (1995), Leak and Randall (1995), Paloutzian (1996), and Pargament (1997), characterize Christian fundamentalism as involving a "belief that a single, essential, inerrant set of religious truths requires specific and unchangeable religious practices" and as being "associated with negative attitudes toward non-Christians, women, and LGB individuals" (p. 207). Fundamentalism endorses scriptural literalism, which eschews cultural interpretations of scripture passages and views the Bible as a set of instructions received directly from God and not subject to correlation with the knowledge or perspective of later times. While Christian fundamentalism is generally identified with some forms of Protestantism, it can also take a Catholic form, which may reject scriptural literalism but which

tends to grant to the office of the Papacy the kind of absolute, non-negotiable authority that Protestant fundamentalists ascribe to the Bible (O'Meara, 1990).

There are also conservative forms of Christianity that, while they do not necessarily take a literalist approach to scripture, are generally less open to revisiting traditional beliefs regarding homosexuality. Some examples of conservative denominations are Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, the Church of Christ, and Assemblies of God (Thumma, 1991, p. 338). Evangelicalism is a form of Christianity that is not confined to one denomination. It encourages an intense, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Though not all Evangelicals subscribe to scriptural literalism, they place a strong emphasis on the authority of scripture in contrast to individual judgment and opinion. Overall, Evangelicalism emphasizes the inerrancy of Scripture and moral conservatism (Thumma, 1991, p. 338). Fundamentalist, conservative, and Evangelical approaches to religion can pose particular challenges for people raised in such beliefs who come to realize they are attracted to members of the same sex. Fowler's model suggests the possibility of a religious identity's ongoing development. It suggests that cognitive dissonance, which Alderson (2003) defines as "incompatibility between two or more cognitions, affects, behaviours, or combinations thereof," can lead to the renegotiation of a religious commitment by reframing the religious debate about a given issue (p. 77). Before proceeding further, it is necessary to move from consideration of religious identity to the formation of a gay identity.

Gay Identity

Sociologically, identity is viewed as "perceptions of self that are thought to represent the self definitively in specific social settings" (Troiden, 1993, p. 193, quoted in Appleby and Anastas, 1998, p. 67). Gay identity, at its most obvious level, refers to an individual's self-labeling using the word "gay." It involves self-acknowledgement that the label fits and the

making of a decision regarding describing oneself as gay to others (Appleby and Anastas, 1998, pp. 66-67). Alderson (2003) defines gay identity as "an identity status denoting those individuals who have come to identify themselves as having primarily homosexual cognition, affect, and/or behaviour, and who have adopted the construct of 'gay' as having personal significance to them" (p. 78). In considering the development of gay identity, it is important to note the difference between sexual orientation and sexual identity. Appleby and Anastas (1998) define sexual orientation as "a characteristic of an individual that describes the people he or she is drawn to for satisfying intimate affectional and sexual needs—people of the same gender, the opposite gender, or of both genders" (p. 49). Sexual orientation refers to a predominant set of attractions and (often, but not always) behaviors. There has been considerable debate over the degree to which a same-sex sexual orientation is innate, influenced by environment, or chosen (pp. 54-60). Although some view evidence that it is innate as a way of liberating homosexuality from the social stigma associated with it in the twentieth-century Western world, other theories challenge the stigma itself by viewing "homosexuality as one possible outcome, among many equally healthy and rewarding outcomes, of social conditioning" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 3). Homosexual behavior has and has had "greatly different meanings in different cultural, historical, and social contexts" (Appleby and Anastas, 1998, p. 55). The degree to which it is praised, ignored, or stigmatized can vary significantly, based on the way in which a culture or time period constructs it. According to Bathje and Pryor (2011), stigma can best be understood as having both external and internal dimensions. They state that "public stigma . . . can be viewed as essentially a form of prejudice, comprised of cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions" (p. 162). They define self-stigma as "the internalized psychological impact of

possessing a stigmatizing characteristic" (p. 163). They observe, "Through self-stigmatization, people can experience losses in self-esteem and self efficacy" (p. 163).

The idea that sexual orientation is perceived through the lens of a particular construct leads to a consideration of the ways in which sexual identity differs from sexual orientation. Sexual orientation extends beyond sexual behavior to incorporate "sexuality, emotionality, and social functioning" (Appleby and Anastas, 1998, p. 51). Sexual identity is a function of an individual's self-labeling (pp. 49-51). The term "sexual identity" refers to "the integration of all these aspects of sexual orientation into a coherent whole, an authentic sense of self, with a self-label that is subjectively meaningful and manageable" (p. 51). The term "gay" is thus one particular social construction of a set of attractions, emotions, and desires that could be construed in other ways (Alderson, 2003, p. 78). McMinn (2005), citing Laumann et al. (1994), states that according to the National Health and Social Life Survey, completed at the end of the twentieth century, while 7.7% of men and 7.5% of women expressed same-sex desires, only 2.8% of men and 1.4% of women self-identified as gay or lesbian (p. 368). Yarhouse, Tan, and Pawlowski (2005) studied both people who had assumed an LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) identity and same-sex-attracted people who disidentified with the gay label. One participant in Yarhouse's study, who identified as Ex-Gay, commented, "I am not gay. I don't identify with the political movement. But I am still attracted to people of the same sex. But I don't act out on it because it's not what God wants of me (Yarhouse et al., 2005, p. 9). Cutts and Parks (2009), in their study of black men who label themselves as gay, note an "invisibility" in black churches of black men who have sex with men, owing to heavy religious and cultural stigma (p. 233). Although she uses the term "homosexual" instead of "gay," Cass (1979), in writing about same-sex

behavior points out the ways in which people can engage in it without adopting a homosexual (gay) label for themselves:

> For males, showing emotion, mouth kissing, and repeated contacts with the same person may be perceived as homosexual, whereas genital contact is simply "fooling around." For females, genital contact is considered homosexual, but strong emotional feelings for another woman are not (p. 224).

All these examples suggest that the choice to adopt or reject a gay identity can be not only a sexual one but also a social or political one.

The process by which individuals come to self-identify as gay has been a significant topic of research and discussion. The most common popular term to describe it is "coming out," which refers to increasing levels of self-realization and self-disclosure (Appleby and Anastas, 1998, pp. 66-72). Cass (1979) developed a six-stage model of "homosexual identity formation" that postulates at each stage a particular relationship among a self-attributed characteristic of a person, the person's perception of his/her behavior prompted by the characteristic, and the person's perception of others' perceptions of the person in light of the characteristic (220-221). Noting that same-sex oriented people generally grow up in anti-homosexual societies that do not promote heterosexuality, Cass postulates that the typical person begins with a self-perception of being heterosexual and non-homosexual (p. 222). Each of Cass's six stages can end either in being prepared to move on to the next one, or in identity foreclosure, where the person stops the process of moving toward a homosexual identity and remains in whatever inner conflicts the current stage may involve.

The earliest stage of Cass's model is identity confusion, in which some homosexual behavior or trait comes to the person's attention. In the second stage, identity comparison, a

person who has admitted some homosexual tendencies begins to explore their implication and to realize his or her differentness. Those able to come to a positive sense of resolution after this exploration move on to identity tolerance, in which they admit their homosexuality to themselves but do not really accept it. If a person in this stage has encountered homosexual community and role models, he or she may be able to move on to the fourth stage, identity acceptance, in which one holds a more positive view of one's homosexuality but can continue to "pass" as straight to society at large. In the fifth stage, identity pride, one becomes fully invested in homosexual identity and "dichotomizes the world into homosexuals (creditable and significant) and heterosexuals (discredited and insignificant) (Cass, 1979, p. 233). One embraces the fact of belonging to the gay community and is filled with a "combination of anger and pride" in which one feels one has betrayed an ideal if one fails to disclose one's gay identity (Cass, pp. 233-234). At the sixth stage, identity synthesis, one moves beyond an "us vs. them" mentality and integrates the supportive elements of broader society, such as sympathetic heterosexuals, into one's life.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) and Fassinger and Miller (1996), as cited in Paul and Frieden (2008), have critiqued Cass and other stage theorists for being overly focused on individuals at the expense of social context. The alternative model they propose is based on research that concludes that "the existing models could not encapsulate the complex and contextual experiences of their participants, such as the ways belief systems, culture, or the social environment may affect individual development" (Paul and Frieden, 2008, p. 29). They propose instead that gay identity development takes place in four phases, rather than stages, because development is "continuous and circular; every new relationship raises new issues about individual sexuality, and every new context requires renewed awareness of group oppression"

(McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 522, as cited in Paul and Frieden, 2008, p. 29). Viewing development as taking place both regarding "individual sexual identity and group membership identity," they posit four phases: Awareness, Exploration, Deepening/Commitment, and Internalization/Synthesis (Paul and Frieden, 2008, p. 29). This conceptualization suggests a broader personal integration: "As individuals move through the four phases, a sense of fulfillment and self-acceptance may coincide with sexual orientation becoming integrated into the larger identity" (Paul and Frieden, 2008, p. 29).

These models differ in emphasis and in some details, but they describe very similar processes. Cass (1984) has said that a four-stage model might work in harmony with her schema in that the differences between some of her stages are slight (Marszalek , Cashwell, Dunn, and Heard Jones, 2004, p. 106). Having discussed a number of possible models, Marszalek and his colleagues (2004) assert:

It is conceivable that all gay models discussed above have merit. Ivey (1993) stated that there are an infinite number of possibilities to define the developmental process, a process that has varying degrees of vertical (i.e. development from one stage to another) and horizontal (i.e., development within a stage) development. Consequently, all theorists may be describing a similar process. The differences may lie in whether theorists view particular developmental tasks as horizontal developmental tasks or vertical. The similarities may lie in the overall process rather than in the number of stages (p. 106).

Marszalek et al. (2004) further note that there may be parallels between models of gay identity and models of racial identity (p. 106). Marszalek and Cashwell (1998), as cited in Marszalek et al., 2004, pp. 106-111), propose an integration of the Developmental Counseling

Therapy (DCT) model (Ivey, 1993, as cited in Marszalek et al, 2004), which uses insights from

Piaget and from Platonic philosophy, with Cass's model. Ivey's model discusses four cognitive

levels, none of which he considers superior to the others. The levels are sensorimotor, concrete-

operational, formal-operational, and dialectic/systemic (pp. 107-108). Results of a study

performed by Marszalek et al. (2004) offered tentative support for the hypothesis that the stages

of Cass's model and Ivey's have some parallels (pp. 121-122).

Alderson (2003) proposes "an ecological theory of gay male identity that incorporates

both developmental stages and process components in explaining identity formation" (p. 76).

His theory incorporates both individual psychology and social factors. He views it as a response

to some of the criticisms made of stage models and argues that it has advantages over them in

that it combines stages and processes. He also points out that his schema posits cognitive

dissonance as the force that motivates a forward developmental movement, and that it is

"holistic" because it accounts for both internal and external influences; he also notes that it does

not posit that all will experience the same outcome (p. 76). He states that his model offers a

sense of direction regarding what needs to be integrated in order to form a positive gay identity

and provides conceptual definitions for sexual orientation and gay identity (pp. 76, 81-82). The

overall phases Alderson envisions are before coming out, during coming out and beyond coming

out.

Alderson's ecological model pictures four triangles, the smaller within the larger,

representing various levels of influence, from the most universal—society, to the level of

parents, peers, and culture, to the level of individual affect, cognition, and behavior, and finally,

to the level of connection to the self, connection to the gay world, and reconnection to the

straight world (Alderson, 2003, p. 76). In Alderson's understanding, an individual experiencing

same-sex attractions will encounter both catalysts and hindrances in coming to acceptance of that aspect of the self. According to Alderson, "When there is enough psychic press, or cognitive dissonance, to push the catalysts above the hindrances, a gay male is able to come out and self-identify as gay" (p. 78). Referring to several theorists whose work he critiques, Alderson rejects an essentialist understanding of gay identity in favor of a constructivist view (p. 77). In light of that view, he sees gay identity as "fluid and ever-changing" (p. 76).

Gay and Christian Identities: Intersection or Integration

Based on the literature on religious identity and gay identity, it may be possible to conceptualize an integration of Christian and gay identities. The literature explores the factors supporting and mitigating against such integration.

The literature suggests that integration of Christian and gay identities may present a steep challenge both internally and in the interpersonal world. While there are pastoral and theological voices and some entire denominations within Christianity that affirm gay identity and relationships (see, e.g. Hunter, 2010; McNeill, 1988; Nelson, 1982), social science literature establishes that gay Christians and other non-heterosexual persons exposed to traditional religions have encountered negative messages about their homosexuality. For example, Morrow (2003) illustrates aptly the tendency of many Jewish and Christian organizations in the United States to oppose same-sex sexual activity. She provides a list of U.S. denominations and their official positions on homosexuality that makes clear the preponderance of condemnatory attitudes at the turn of this century. Hunter (2010) points out a spectrum of actual and possible Christian responses to homosexuality, a spectrum that ranges from punitive condemnation to full acceptance.

Prevailing religious teachings may not be articulated in a harsh or hostile tone, but they may nevertheless contribute to the stigmatization of gay people. McMinn (2005), an Evangelical Christian writer, describes same-sex attraction as "a broken representation of sexuality as God designed it" (p. 368). In the Roman Catholic Church, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) (1986) has described homosexuality as an "objective disorder," and homosexual activity as inherently selfish behavior "to which no one has any conceivable right." Such statements are amplified by cruder and more extreme instances of Christian preaching, with perhaps the ultimate example being the "God hates fags" campaign of the Westboro Baptist Church, a Kansas-based church group that blames acceptance of homosexuality for all America's ills and even uses an incendiary style of protesting at military funerals (WBC, 2011). Being exposed to such teachings can lead gay Christians, and perhaps others as well, to experience significant inner conflict (Hunter, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010).

Many prevailing teachings influence not only gay people exposed to Christianity but also the attitudes of other Christians, leading to the social stigmatization of non-heterosexual people. Hinrichs and Rosenberg (2002) surveyed liberal arts college students and found a relationship between lower religiosity and more accepting attitudes toward homosexuality. Finlay and Walther (2003) identify a strong relationship between conservative religious upbringing and negative attitudes toward homosexuality among college students. Similarly, Newman (2002) studied college graduates beginning studies in social work or counseling and found that conservative Protestants had the most negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. Hammersmith (1987), Yip (1997), and Rodriguez (2010) all point out the significance of experiencing stigmatization in the lives of non-heterosexual people and the task of managing and coping with the stigma that falls upon them.

The literature indicates that many gay Christians face the challenge of navigating their way through life in the midst of both external stigma and the internal conflict that is its by-product. Citing studies performed between 1970 and 1994, Yip (1997) states that, "compared to their non-religious counterparts, gay and lesbian Christians generally demonstrate a higher level of anxiety about the exposure of their sexuality, a greater sense of alienation, as well as a lower degree of self-esteem" (p. 165). More recently, Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Frazier (2005) report that "many LGB individuals do report internal conflict between their religious faith and sexual orientation, conflicts that are associated with increased shame, depression, suicidal ideation, and difficulty accepting an LBG identity" (p. 379).

Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) outline four overall strategies by which people respond to being both homosexually oriented and Christian. The first course of action is to reject one's Christian identity. The authors cite Singer and Deschamps (1994), who concluded that up to 62% of gays and lesbians do not view religion as an important part of their lives (Rodriguez and Ouellette, 2000, p. 334). Some gays and lesbians move away from religious beliefs. Others change affiliations. Still others "simply allow their religion to slip quietly out of their lives" (p. 334).

A second strategy that Rodriguez and Ouellette identify involves rejecting a gay identity. This option can entail seeking to become heterosexual through reparative therapy, or can simply amount to practicing sexual abstinence. One finds examples of this rejection in the "Ex-Gay" movement and in organizations like Courage, an organization for Roman Catholics who seek support in living celibately according to Church teaching (Courage, 2011). There is a great deal of research on reparative therapy and the Ex-Gay movement, most of it highly critical of the psychological impact of both on those seeking to reject a gay identity in order to preserve a sense

of harmony with their religious traditions or other important aspects of their identity. Grace

(2008)

condemns reparative therapy and the Ex-Gay movement for using "pseudoscience"   (p. 545).

Parelli (2007), a former Baptist pastor, recounts his dissatisfaction with Ex-Gay therapy after

participating in the movement for years. Toscano (2009) describes the growth, particularly on

the internet, of an Ex-Gay "survivor" movement. Along the same lines, Rix (2010), who

experienced deleterious effects from his own participation in the Ex-Gay movement and went on

to earn a doctorate in Education and to work as a sex therapist, documents his emotional and

spiritual journey in his book *Ex-Gay No Way*. The National Association of Social Workers

(NASW) explicitly rejects reparative therapy as being unnecessary, scientifically ill supported,

and potentially harmful (Just the Facts Coalition, 2008).

The third strategy Rodriguez and Ouellette outline is compartmentalization, in which gay

Christians simply separate their religious lives from their sexual lives. The fourth strategy is

called "identity integration," in which "individuals hold a positive gay identity, a positive

religious identity, and do not feel conflict between the two" (p. 334).

In their study of 105 LGBQQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning) young adults

between the ages of 18 and 24, Dahl and Galliher (2009) identified five central themes similar to

the schema Rodriguez and Ouellette have developed. These themes are "having a spiritual rather

than a religious identity, having no religious identification, experiencing no conflict,

compartmentalizing identities, and currently experiencing conflict" (p. 102). Dahl and Galliher

point to eight factors that assist in the integration of religious and non-heterosexual identities, in

descending order of importance: accepting oneself and having a sense of completeness,

knowledge of biblical or religious readings, support of friends involved in the church, family

support, spiritual reasons, participating in an affirming religious organization, clergy support, and therapist support (p. 105).

Research on the topic of the intersection of Christianity with homosexuality abounds. Valacchi's (2004) study indicates equal religious well being among heterosexual and homosexual members of two Catholic parishes; while "religious well-being" is a different construct than integration, her findings may have relevance for a study of the integration of the gay Christian identity. Yip (2002, 1997) has written extensively about integration in the lives of non-heterosexual British Christians. Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) studied members of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a gay-affirming church with an Evangelical Christian theology and worship style, in New York City. Enroth (1974) wrote about the MCC some years earlier. Wolkomir (2001a; 2001b) has studied gay and Ex-Gay Christian support groups in terms of their ideological self-positioning and their methods of recruiting and supporting members and offering members particular ways of navigating a same-sex orientation and Christian faith. Similarly, Hutchins (2001) examines the philosophical challenges to Christianity that arise from a reconsideration of issues related to homosexuality. Schnoor (2006) draws upon literature about the integration of homosexuality and Christianity to explore the intersecting identities of gayness and Judaism.

Several studies are particularly relevant for this thesis in that they add clarification to its conceptual framework. In the first, Sherry et al. (2009) based their survey on a postmodern concept of the self as fluid and evolving and chose a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. Quantitative questions focused on religion in subjects' childhoods, levels of spiritual and religious well-being, and the relative conservatism or liberalism of their churches of origin as "predictors of shame, guilt, and internalized homophobia" (p. 113). Qualitative questions then

helped the researchers to place these findings "into a broader context of personal narrative and individual experience" (p. 113).

Sherry and her colleagues (2009) obtained 373 respondents for quantitative questions and 422 for the qualitative section. They found their subjects through online requests posted on LGBT list serves and websites. The questionnaires were completed online, with fewer respondents choosing to complete both the quantitative and qualitative sections. The authors used a number of instruments as part of their questionnaire: the Religious Emphasis Scale, Quest Scale, Spiritual Well-being Scale, Harder Personal Feelings Questionnaire, and the Internalized Homophobia Scale (p. 114). The authors found that "conservative religious beliefs were related to higher levels of shame, guilt, and internalized homophobia" and that "issues around sexual orientation were the catalyst for questioning or changing religious affiliation or beliefs" (p. 112). Although the authors did not offer a precise definition of "conservative," they asked study participants to rate the level of conservatism of their childhood religion on a seven-point scale.

A recent study on the integration of sexual and spiritual identities was performed by Dahl and Galliher (2009), who surveyed 105 LGBQQ adults between the ages of 18 and 24. These participants were recruited from electronic mailing lists of community LGBTQ-affirming groups, LGBTQ centers, and gay-straight alliances across the country. The survey was online and anonymous. The study sought to measure the degree to which LGBQQ young adults experience conflict between religious and non-heterosexual identities when coming out, the extent to which they are able to integrate these identities, and whether there are gender differences in responses. The survey sought demographic information and other information concerning sexual orientation history, religious experience, and religious and sexual identity integration. The authors concluded that while "LGBQQ young adults do not report a high degree

of sexual and religious identity integration, factors such as self-acceptance and increased

knowledge were instrumental for those who reported integration" (p. 92). The authors state that

their findings may be reflective of generally lower interest in religion and spirituality among

young adults, or they may indicate that the task of integrating a non-heterosexual identity and a

spiritual identity is generally carried out later in adulthood (pp. 106-108). The findings also

suggest that particular attention be paid to narrative data that address themes of self-acceptance

and increased knowledge.

Two other studies help clarify conceptualization of this thesis. Thumma (1991) studied

an Atlanta-based organization of gay Evangelical Christians called Good News in the mid-1980s.

He observed 20 meetings, conducted interviews with seven members, and studied its

correspondence, newsletter, and published literature (p. 337). Good News was in many ways a

pre-internet anticipation of GCN. It was a "parachurch" whose membership was comparable in

make-up to GCN's (p. 336). It served as a point of information and community for hundreds of

people from across the country, often isolated from experiences of gay community more

accessible to people living in urban areas. It had meetings in Atlanta and also had affiliate

groups, distributed a quarterly newsletter to about 400 people, and corresponded with over 1,300

people (p. 336). Its correspondents tended to be people struggling with tensions between their

Evangelical Christian identities and their same-sex attractions. Thumma saw them as

experiencing cognitive dissonance, which occurs when one attempts to hold "two inconsistent

cognitive elements" together (p. 335). Thumma states that some aspects of a self-concept come

to be considered part of one's "core identity" (p. 335). Thumma notes that the literature both

establishes that people with stigmatized identities often make those statuses their central point of

self-understanding and indicates that gay people tend to organize their identities around their gay

identity (p. 335). Thumma also observes that religion generally seeks to claim core identity status as well:

> The ideologies and practices of many religious groups encourage a self-concept
> organized around one's religious identity (Ammerman, 1987; Peshkin, 1986). A
> particular view of the world becomes the sacred canopy which makes sense of all other
> experiences. The more a person is encapsulated and indoctrinated in a religious
> perspective the less likely he or she is to change (Gecas, 1981; Greil and Rudy, 1984a).
> (Thumma, 1991, p. 335).

Thumma asserts that "most people live with a great deal of inconsistency in their lives." But he sees the "felt tension between being a conservative Christian and having homosexual feelings" as a reflection of the cognitive dissonance that can arise from having competing core identities (p. 335). He states, "The motivational force of cognitive dissonance arises when the person perceives the inconsistency intolerable [*sic*], thus seeking dissonance resolution in some form" (p. 335).

Thumma argues that people actively participate in "identity negotiation" (p. 334). Rather than being experienced as a passive process, socialization involves a dialectical interaction between the individual and the group. He argues that many of the gay Evangelical Christians he studied engaged in an identity negotiation process that kept as much of each identity intact as possible, such that "their core identity [became] a gay Evangelical Christian one" (p. 334). This process took place through a critical reappraisal of religious resources combined with bringing Evangelical moral and spiritual values to their gay lives. While many came to Good News having feared they were going to Hell and having experienced significant rejection from family and friends, over time they came to accept a historically contextual interpretation of scriptural

passages relating to homosexuality.[2] They came to embrace a new "gay Christian identity" and to view their earlier experiences of condemnation at the hands of their churches "as a hindrance to becoming 'whole' Christians" (p. 342).

Thumma states that Good News set out to help its members consolidate a new identity that delineated itself from both their churches of origin and the secular gay community:

> [One] technique is to present the current gay Christian identity as part of an oppressed minority, thus seeing outside, "unenlightened," groups as hostile and misguided. "Being different" is strengthened further by and [*sic*] the creation of an "elitist" group identity. Both conservative denominations and certain secular gay groups are viewed as opposing the truthfulness of Good News's position. The former errs in not accepting gays in the Christian fellowship. The latter is at fault for devaluing Christian involvement in the gay community. Another approach the group uses is to infuse many of the morals of the evangelical lifestyle into the gay lifestyle. Good News states that sexual expression and relationships are to be guided by biblical principles, not by wanton desires. Ideally, one should engage in sexual activity only in a committed relationship (p. 343).

Thumma goes on to say that some Good News members noted a frustration with gay-supportive Christian groups they had tried, such as MCC, which one member perceived as having put "gay before God" (p. 338). Good News members maintained an Evangelical style of piety and many Evangelical practices, but their having reinterpreted scriptural passages applicable to their homosexuality prompted a more critical response to their religious backgrounds in other areas:

> At the same time, however, these members are no longer traditional Evangelical Christians according to doctrinal beliefs. They do not believe in the inerrancy of the

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[2] For examples of a historical-critical approach to scripture, see McNeill, 1976 and Nelson, 1982.

Bible. They are less affected by the moral proscriptions against drinking, dancing, sex

outside of marriage, and most of all, homosexuality. The leadership, and some of the

members, align politically with the left on issues of war, poverty, individual rights,

abortion, and foreign policies. Members almost inevitably become somewhat more

tolerant of the rights of others such as blacks and women (pp. 344-345).

Thumma's findings are now 20 years old and related to an organization that had disbanded by

the time of his writing. According to Thumma, the leadership's emphasis on external

communication over recruitment and several leaders' becoming more committed to AIDS work

led to its demise (p. 337). The demise of Good News notwithstanding, Thumma's study offers

an in-depth examination of the topics of identity negotiation, cognitive dissonance, experience of

rejection, results of being open to new forms of biblical interpretation, the critique of both gay

and Christian communities, and the idea of a consolidated new identity.

Finally, Paul and Frieden (2008) performed a study that focused on gay identity

development in men, conducting five in-depth, largely open-ended interviews. Participants also

completed the Inclusive Model of Homosexual Identity Formation (the authors cite Fassinger,

2001 for this instrument). The research uncovered five common themes present in the men's

quest for self-acceptance as members of a sexual minority:

Five domains were discovered, including: (a) Crisis or Pain as Related to Development;

(b) Importance of Relationship or Connection to Others; (c) Experience of a Dual Identity

Related to Gay and Straight Worlds (or the Old and New Selves); (d) A New

Construction of Spirituality; and (3) The Journey to Acceptance as Worthwhile (p. 36).

While religious identity was not a central focus of their study, Paul and Frieden gathered data that have implications for the present research. All five men had been part of a Christian denomination. All of them had received a "judgmental message" regarding sexual minorities from their religious traditions (p. 40). Nevertheless, "each of the participants identified himself as currently spiritual or religious" (p. 40). Moreover, "each man conveyed that his earlier religious beliefs had changed in some way as he had come to accept their [*sic*] gay identity" (p. 41).

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here identifies conceptual contributions to investigating the intersection of gay identity and Christian identity. It furthermore identifies the intersection of sexual and religious identities as a potential area of internal conflict for many gay Christians. It reveals the role of social stigma in these people's lives. Faced with internal conflict and external stigmatization, gay Christians can respond in a number of ways identified in social science literature—rejection of Christianity altogether, rejection of one's gay identity in the hope of greater harmony with one's Christian allegiances, compartmentalization, and integration of one's Christian and gay identities.

This study of gay male Christians focuses on the formation of religious and sexual identities and the process of how one set of people—men who identify as both gay and Christian—go about finding a resolution of the dissonance between the two in search of a cohesive self. Literature on patterns of development—intellectual, social, psychological, and religious—and strategies of reinterpretation and identity negotiation holds particular relevance as a conceptual framework for this study.

Chapter III

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this study has been to gain insight into the process by which some gay men integrate their gay and Christian identities. The research was exploratory and qualitative in nature. It was mainly concerned with obtaining a deeper understanding of a subgroup of the overall cohort of non-heterosexual people whose interaction with their religions has been explored in other research. It may then assist in the formulation of better questions for further research and the exploration of the intersection of religious and sexual identities in the lives of other sub-groups of non-heterosexual people. The central question of the study is: How do men who label themselves as both gay and Christian go about the process of integrating their religious and sexual identities? The question is explored using the results of semi-structured interviews with a sample of gay Christian men.

Design

This was an exploratory, qualitative study of 11 self-identified gay, Christian, adult men. It involved semi-structured, audiotaped interviews designed to last up to 60 minutes. The intent was to identify common and divergent themes in the participants' accounts of the manner in which they experienced the intersection of their gay and Christian identities and their approaches to integrating them. The survey followed the traditions of qualitative research as articulated by Rubin and Babbie (2010).

Sampling

Participants were recruited as a convenience sample from among members of the Gay Christian Network (GCN) who attended the annual GCN Conference held in Denver, Colorado from January 6-9, 2011. The GCN is an internet-based international community of approximately 15,000 members (Lee, 2011). There were approximately 400 attendees at the Denver conference (Lee, 2011). The author, who identifies as a gay Christian man, joined and remains a member of GCN. Membership provided access to the GCN website and the ability to communicate with other GCN members on it, as well as an entrée to attending the conference.

In addition to the formal interviews, conference attendance made it possible to observe and interact with GCN members in various settings—workshops, worship services, and social events. All interviews were conducted at the conference. Between 12 and 15 participants were sought. Recruitment took place primarily through postings on the GCN website. The text of the recruitment posting is attached as Appendix A. Since this effort did not result in a sufficiently large sample, attendees at the conference were approached randomly and invited to participate. All participants were required to identify as gay Christian men, to be at least 18 years of age, to be able to speak English, and to be attending the GCN Conference. In total, 11 men were interviewed. Care was taken to protect human subjects by asking them to read and sign a consent form explaining the potential uses of the information to be obtained, the potential risks and benefits of participation, procedures to protect confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participating. The consent form is attached as Appendix B; approval by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Board is attached as Appendix C. With one exception owing to logistical difficulty, all of the interviews were conducted in a conference room obtained at the hotel where the conference took place. The room was set up with chairs

and several tables. It was on a floor that was not highly traveled by other conference participants, thus helping to promote confidentiality.

Instrumentation

At the beginning of each interview, in order to obtain demographic data, each participant was asked to state his name, age, race, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and the geographical region where he lived. This information was obtained prior to audiotaping, noted in writing, and stored in a secure location. Each participant was asked the same series of questions from the semi-structured interview format, designed to evoke his thoughts on his Christian identity, his gay identity, and the process by which he integrates the two, including responses to his gayness by the Christian community and responses to his Christianity by the gay community. The interview format is attached as Appendix D. Prior to the interviews, the format was pretested on three gay male Christians personally known to the author. They provided feedback that helped to identify aspects of the questions that might be misunderstood or that might result in the question being responded to on a yes/no basis. This feedback did not necessitate the formal revision of the interview format. Instead, minor paraphrasing and follow-up questions were used to ensure that the instrument would elicit the types of data sought.

Approach to the Analysis of Data

The data were examined for common and divergent themes and for possible associations between demographic variables and responses to questions about the integration of identity. The primary focus of analysis was on qualitative, narrative data that could illuminate the participants' experience of integrating their gay and Christian identities.

Chapter IV

Findings

Introduction

The sample for this study was obtained from a population of gay Christian men who attended the 2011 Gay Christian Network (GCN) conference in Denver, Colorado. The eleven men interviewed for this study ranged in age from 25 to 55. Five were in their twenties. Two were in their thirties. One was in his forties. Two were in their fifties. All of the participants identified as gay. Two identified as biracial. The remainder identified as white. With the exception of one man who was raised as a Roman Catholic and later became Pentecostal, and another who was raised Protestant but attended Catholic schools at the behest of his Catholic grandparents, the religious upbringing of all the participants consisted entirely of conservative Protestantism. The men were geographically diverse. Two were currently from the Northeastern United States; two were from the Mid-Atlantic Region, one from the Southeast, one from the Southwest, three from the Midwest, one from the West Coast, and one from the Pacific Northwest. One grew up in Latin America and immigrated to the United States.

In order to protect confidentiality, each of the participants will be referred to using a pseudonym. The following is a list of participants along with the age, race, and geographical location of each:

- Adam, 34, White, Southeast

- Bob, 25, White, Mid-Atlantic, originally from Latin America

- Charlie, 26, White, Southwest

- David, 54, White, Midwest

- Ed, 30, Northeast

- Frank, 27, White, Northeast

- Gerry, 27, White/Other, Northwest

- Hal, 51, White, West Coast

- Ian, 40, White, Mid-Atlantic

- Jim, 55, White, Midwest

- Ken, 28, White, Midwest

Despite individual variations and points of divergence, which will be noted below, all of the participants were engaged in a process of integration of their gay and Christian identities. The central finding of this research is that the participants reported a number of common experiences that took place in the context of a similar chronological order. First, the participants all reported going through a time when their sense of belonging in conservative Christian communities was challenged by the participants' (and sometimes others') increasing perception of their homosexual orientations. They reported feelings of isolation. Some stated that they engaged in self-isolation in anticipation of external rejection by their religious communities. Some actually experienced such rejection. For some, there was a combination of self-isolation and rejection by others. The participants all reported that they experienced a clash between their sense of their emerging gay identities and the attitudes and expectations of their Christian communities. This clash ultimately led to a point at which they felt the need to respond in some way.

The data shared by the participants indicate that their initial responses to the clash tended to involve an attempt either to explore their homosexuality without integrating it with their

religious identities, or to reject having a gay identity. All of the participants reported that these steps ultimately proved unsatisfactory to them and led them to the conclusion that they needed to find a way to uphold both their gay identities and their Christian identities. The chronology of common experiences reported by the participants will be explored in greater detail below.

Initial Experiences of Dissonance Between Christian and Emerging Gay Identities

The participants in this study all reported experiences of dissonance as they, and sometimes others, came to realize that they had a homosexual orientation. Since the churches to which they belonged condemned homosexual sex, and some churches condemned the homosexual orientation itself, this realization undermined the participants' sense of belonging to their churches. Some were not rejected explicitly but felt unwelcome. Others experienced overt rejection. Some reported both experiences. Several reported having isolated themselves in order to protect themselves from possible rejection. Reports of each experiences are set forth below.

Experiences of isolation and implicit rejection. Several participants spoke of feeling isolated and without support as their awareness of their homosexual orientation dawned. Hal describes a gradual realization of his same-sex attractions during his childhood and youth:

At some point, I came to terms with it and admitted it to myself in high school. I was pretty clear about what was going on and ventured off to the Christian bookstore to find a Christian book on homosexuality and read it. I tore the cover off and stashed it in a cabin. I don't remember where I got any messages that this was something you didn't talk about. There wasn't anybody to talk to.

Hal adds, "I've sat in church and felt this resentment of feeling invisible and unheard and unacknowledged and I've had feelings of just kind of hurt that the church doesn't really get the pain they're causing." Echoing Hal's description of the ways in which homosexuality was made

invisible, David states that one of his first experiences of gay people did not take place until early

adulthood, when he saw protestors at an Anita Bryant event in the 1970s.

Ian also experienced a sense of isolation because homosexuality was rendered invisible.

He reports that because he grew faster than his peers and his mannerisms were not effeminate, he

did not experience harassment while growing up. Nevertheless, he felt isolated because of

unwritten rules he attributes both to his Christian community and to his German-American

cultural background:

> I grew up in a rural community in _____. I don't know if it's because the congregation I
>
> grew up in was mostly German and Germans don't talk about sex. So homosexuality was
>
> never mentioned in the church I grew up in. If you were an alien from outer space and
>
> listened to 20 years of sermons from there you'd never know gay people existed.

Ian says he felt "like I'm the only one" and that during his childhood he experienced "lots of

confusion, lots of loneliness. I thought the only gay people on the planet lived in New York and

San Francisco."

Ian reported that in adulthood, he experienced a more direct sense of implicit rejection

when, at the age of 22, he was filling out an application to go on a church mission trip to Eastern

Europe. The form asked whether the applicant had ever had a same-sex experience. At the time,

Ian could honestly check "no," and he notes that the form stated that a "yes" answer would not

automatically have disqualified him. But he says that the form made him wonder, "Does my

orientation exclude me from mission?" He relates that this experience "has stuck with me."

Experiences of explicit rejection. For other participants, there was explicit rejection. It

varied in degrees of harshness. For some, rejection was aimed directly at them. In other

instances, it came in the form of general statements that made it clear that they were not accepted

as gay men. Adam was raised in a Charismatic Pentecostal church. His parents were ministers and he was gifted in theater ministry. He relates, "Word started to get around I was gay. The youth pastor who I had told in confidence trying to change it was so horrified he started calling other churches and we started getting cancellations." In his adulthood, Adam left his parents' church. The pastor there had learned that Adam was gay and "started preaching on it every Sunday. He looked right at me from the pulpit—'If you're gay, you're not a Christian. You'll burn in Hell.'" Adam states, "It destroyed me. I came out to my Dad and decided I wouldn't go back."

David also reports personal rejection by his pastor and others. David did not identify as gay until his early 50s. Since doing so, he has lost several important friends from his church. A friend outed David to their minister and invited David to dinner without telling him that the minister would be joining them. The minister proceeded to open a Bible and started reading from the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans.[3] He then set forth conditions for David to remain part of the church. At the time of his interview, David reported he had not attended the church in the four months since that event and said the worship at the GCN conference was his first church experience since the dinner.

In adulthood, Ian met with the explicit rejection he escaped in his youth:

I was a musician for a church in _____ and told the pastor there that I was struggling with homosexual issues at that point. "I'd like your prayer suggestions," whatever. And he freaked out about it and said, "You've got to stop leading music. You need a break." He

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[3] Romans 1 contains several passages that many Christians have interpreted as condemning all expressions of homosexuality.

slowly ostracized me from the ministry. I was really close to the pastor. Suddenly I became an estranged person.

Some rejection came in milder forms but it also served to shut down the participants' attempts to seek help from their churches in working out their how to respond to their emerging sexual identities.

Frank had such an experience. He states that when he spoke of having homosexual attractions to his father and his minister during his adolescence, the message he received was "figure out what changed and go back and fix it." Gerry reports that in the church in which he grew up, "I was told I wasn't gay because there's no such thing as a gay person; it was a choice I made. You can't be gay and Christian. All the typical things you hear are what I received not only from my Christian community, my friends, but from the family."

Protective self-isolation. Some participants also created distance from their fellow Christians in order to avoid a feared rejection. Hal states:

A lot of it has been me withdrawing. I kind of pick and choose on who I disclose to. . . . There have been people who have been completely accepting and there have been people, good friends, I've brought it up with and the topic never comes up again and they are like, "One of these days we're going to find you a good wife." And there's people that I haven't told because I'm very clear that it probably would be the end of the relationship. I haven't had any bad experiences because I kind of withdrew from the church for my own self-preservation. It's been pretty benign in some ways, but I've kind of avoided the judgment.

Ken says he chose to come out at a geographical distance from his hometown:

I knew was risking losing friends, family, church, all of that. Fortunately I was just

moving so I didn't have a church. In my hometown my church practices Christian

discipline. It may have gone through the formal process of kicking me out of the church

and giving me up to Satan so that my flesh might be destroyed and all that stuff. I've

seen them do that, [though] not for homosexuality.[4]

Charlie initially tried to avoid rejection by leaving on his own before it could happen:

 "When I realized I was gay, I didn't really have this big coming out event within the Pentecostal

church because I knew what the reaction was going to be. I pretty much decided I was going to

drop off the face of the earth and not have this big confrontation." But the rejection came later.

Several years later, he began reconnecting with Christian friends from his youth online via social

media. When they found out Charlie was gay, "I got all these emails asking how could this

happen to you and you go to the dark side, so to speak, and I found there was a lot of ignorance

and a lot of not understanding gay issues from these people."

Thus, data obtained from the participants indicate that they had experiences of being

isolated and rejected by their Christian communities as their sense of having a homosexual

orientation began to emerge. Ultimately, the found themselves responding in order to address

the tension and dissonance they felt.

Responses to Initial Dissonance

Participants reported several ways of responding to the dissonance they experienced

between their Christian identities and emerging gay identities. Several attempted to resolve it by

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[4] This is an apparent reference to 1 Corinthians 5:5, a passage that describes an early Christian church discipline of excluding from fellowship a member who stubbornly engages in gravely condemned conduct, in the hope that the exclusion will ultimately work to the offender's salvation.

engaging in casual gay sexual encounters while holding the Christian aspect of their identities at bay. Though none reported rejecting his Christian faith, some appear to have gone through a period of compartmentalization. Others attempted to deny or overcome their gayness through participation in Ex-Gay ministry or reparative therapy or by suppressing their homosexual attractions in some other manner. In several instances, it was guilt feelings from having experimented with casual gay sex that prompted the desire to reject a gay identity. Ultimately, they found that none of these responses succeeded in resolving the dissonance they were experiencing.

Compartmentalization and casual sex. Several participants spoke of pursuing casual same-sex encounters and avoiding ongoing relationships as a way of indulging sexual urges without compromising their overall Christian lifestyle. Adam states that in his twenties, he "went through my own sexual revolution, being sexually active in unhealthy ways." Bob reports that, growing up in Latin America, he had "a double personality.   Had my gay life. I had my Christian life." Of his life at that time, Bob observes:

Here's what I am—a whore, a slut, a promiscuous guy, addicted guy, addicted to sex. . . . People use sex as drugs so you don't know yourself, your boundaries, your limits, all you know is that [it] feels good. I have a huge low self-esteem. If someone feels attracted to you, your body, you use that to feel good and you literally just kill your soul. You are nothing.

He elaborates:

When I was in my slutty times, I just felt being gay means sleeping with a lot of people. When I was a kid, I basically killed my feelings towards men and felt having feelings was more sinful than just have sex. Weird, but it was the only way I could explore my

homosexuality, through sex. To say, "Hey, I love you," to another man as a culture was

far, far away from my imagination. . . . I had a boyfriend when I was 20 and now I can

understand that he was my boyfriend. At the time, I thought, "I'm using this guy." I sort

of felt that I was a secret agent and my mission was expose, to extract all his secrets, all

his history, and that's how I used to see myself. To not love him or not like him . . . I

killed the feelings because I couldn't accept the feelings. Sex is easy. It's not easy to

love.

Bob compares his early gay life to the Batman comic series character "Two-Face." Ultimately,

he came to a point of crisis. He reports having had suicidal ideation and thinking that if he could

destroy his body he could be free from sexual sin.

Hal's account of his early attempts to reckon with his homosexual attractions echoes the

sense of bifurcation that emerges from Bob's story:

I kind of got into the whole gay thing just being so horny, trying to figure out what the

hell to do with my sexuality. I knew that if I tried to keep it all tampered down it . . .

would come out in really crazy ways like, you know, the bathroom stall kind of weakness

and the cruising. It's not very integrated and authentic and it's disconnected from

relationships. I had this view that as a Christian it was one thing just to have a casual

sexual encounter and that I could confess that as a sin, but it was far worse to actually be

in a relationship. Ironically that's the value system—it's like the alcoholic who has a

drink as opposed to the one who's chronically drinking. I realized how distorted that was

because it basically set you up.

Hal ultimately pursued reparative therapy and joined the Ex-Gay movement.

Similarly, Ian recounts the manner in which guilt over sexual experimentation led him to the Ex-Gay movement:

In high school and college I was a virgin. Shortly after college, I was unemployed, stressed out, had a bout with pneumonia. I was just in a bad, bad state. I heard on the TV news about a drug bust at a gay bar [nearby] and I thought, "Who knew?" So I wrote down the address and went in there and met this guy and had my first sexual experience and felt this guilt. "I'm going to Hell. I'm getting AIDS." So I joined this Ex-Gay ministry. In my experience, it helped in a way.

Ian was not alone in ascribing some beneficial role to Ex-Gay ministries, though ultimately he rejected them.

Attempting to reject a gay identity. Three participants volunteered that they had participated in some way in the Ex-Gay movement. A fourth, Frank, shared his observations of others' experiences of it. He states that he is happy that he did not participate in Ex-Gay therapy after seeing it damage other people based on what he views as the false premise that a homosexual orientation can be changed:

I find a lot of my peers often experience at some point in their lives, they're also sent to Ex-Gay therapy and I was lucky enough not to have been sent and I found a supportive spiritual home, but I can see how it definitely would affect the psychological process growing up in this thing. . . . [There is] psychological damage inflicted by therapy like that. I'm in my late twenties and a lot of my friends that I've met here have gone through it just to please their parents, but a lot of them are still struggling and I think part of it is because they got this conflicting information, information that they could change. At the core of my being I knew I couldn't change. If I could, surely [after] 15 years of prayer

I'd have been straight. I see a lot of them damaged and still healing emotionally from all that and when talking to a gay Christian that's an important consideration.

Hal was involved with Homosexuals Anonymous, Exodus Ministries, a private therapist, and the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH). He says he began attending Homosexuals Anonymous meetings as a way of getting "help and support." It was his first contact with a group of others who shared his homosexual orientation. He describes the atmosphere at the meetings as "surreal. I didn't know any gay people. . . . [It was] titillating, scary, hopeful, painful, all at the same time." He observes, "They don't say they're trying to make you straight, but that's kind of the model they put out there."

Hal did not sense himself changing, which made him feel "like God was working on other peoples' lives, not mine. Does that mean I'm less loved by God or less desirable to God or just not trying hard enough?" Hal went to several Christian therapists for treatment. "One guy, I think his idea was if he could get me laid I'd be okay and he'd actually set me up with his female patients for dates. That was rather disastrous in a lot of ways besides being completely unethical, which I didn't know at the time." Hal found the people at Exodus Ministries to be "caring and loving and supportive," but that Exodus seemed to promote the idea that "some kind of magical process would occur if I hung out with them and thought about women."

Ian found Exodus Ministries to be helpful in prompting him to face his gay identity. "It was the first time I said I was gay. That organization forced me to say it and get on the road to recovery. Obviously I didn't stay with the Ex-Gay ministry. About five years, then my job moved me." Ultimately, Ian found the ministry unsatisfactory and joined a gay-affirming Presbyterian church. He explains, "I saw a lack of progress in anybody in the ministry. I felt like I probably attended the meetings more than anybody. I didn't see anybody changing and it

was just making everybody miserable." The ministry held an "Ex-Gay Forum" at which members had to "confess anything you did or thought in the last week." Ian said he heard "titillating tales." He began to perceive a lack of integration in himself: "I had several anonymous encounters when I was going through that just because I was trying to be something else and couldn't help myself. I was like, 'This isn't working. I'm going to kill myself.' I was like two people at the same time." Looking back, Ian observes:

> Being part of a church that was affirming got me away from the promiscuous trysts and all that. Ex-Gay ministries try to pin you into that. You can go out and hook up all you want as long as you come back the next week and confess. But you can't come back and say, "I've found a partner." That's off the table.

Thus, for Ian, Ex-Gay ministries came to be seen as a hindrance to personal integration.

Jim approached his time with Ex-Gay ministries as part of a discernment process. He was already a deacon in his church. He states, "I think the issue was I valued God and if God is the creator of the universe and wants me to be at peace, I have to find out what God thinks about this. I read both sides. Wanted to hear what people are saying." In this context of discernment, he attended an Ex-Gay conference at which many of the big names of the movement were speakers. As was the case with Hal and Ian, Jim found the willingness of the Ex-Gay movement simply to discuss the issue refreshing. But, despite a powerful experience of being "slain in the Spirit" at a prayer service there, he ultimately found the Ex-Gay side unsatisfying:

> I can remember saying, "I like ice cream and I can discipline myself not to eat ice cream, but I still like ice cream. It doesn't sound like you're telling me the gay feelings will ever go away. They didn't have a real answer. It convinced me they didn't necessarily have the answers.

After being "slain in the Spirit" at a charismatic prayer event, Jim says he was told "we don't think you're cured." He responded, "I'm not searching for a cure. I'm searching for the truth."

Ken attempted to lead a life of sexual abstinence and to contain his homosexual impulses. As was the case with all the participants whose reflections are shared above, Ken ultimately arrived at a crisis point brought about by his keenly felt lack of wholeness. He observes:

> I felt I was essentially dying inside. In retrospect, it was simply because I had so very effectively learned to shut down affection for anybody. I had not allowed myself to love anybody else or them to love me. I think the human being dies inside. That had come to a head for me. I thought, "I've got to find other people like me." At that time, I didn't know where to find gay Christians so I went online. . . . Where I ended up going was me on a dating website saying I'm just looking for friends, . . . finding this guy that was interested in me and just it's like the wall of the dam breaking, getting a taste for the idea that someone could love me and I could love them. The whole thing was an absolute sham. Online, it felt real. It showed me something that I was missing. It revealed a giant hole I didn't see before. It basically broke me in the ways we sometimes have to be broken before we can hear the still, small voice of God.[5]

For Ken and the other participants whose experiences are described above, their initial responses to the intersection of their Christian identity and an emerging sense of themselves as gay men proved to be unsatisfactory. This prompted them to pursue integration of their gay and Christian identities.

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[5] This is an apparent reference to 1 Kings 19: 11-13.

Pursuit of Integration

Data obtained from the participants in this study point to their having found ways they can continue to identify themselves as Christians while simultaneously affirming their gay identities. A number of them spoke of being able to detach their belief in and relationship with God and/or Christ from the social context in which they first became Christians. They also reported that they have been able to refashion both the contents and the overall theological approach of their earliest beliefs through a process of personal study, attitudinal change, and arriving at personal conclusions about the right course for them to take as gay Christians based upon their observations of their own and others' experiences. The participants also discussed challenges they faced in relating to both the Christian and the gay communities as self-identified gay Christians.   Several articulated a sense of personal mission to the gay community, the Christian community, or both, based on their integrated gay and Christian identities. Finally, they spoke of integration as an ongoing process. Each of these findings will be explored in greater depth below.

Separating Christian faith from a particular church affiliation. The participants generally reported that they focused more on a personal relationship with God and/or Christ than on any particular ecclesiastical context. For Adam, being Christian "is about trying to live like Christ, the message of hope and mercy and love and peace." Bob describes his realization that God loves him as the turning point in his life as a gay Christian: "Because of that view that God loves me, I just figured out that, hey, I don't need to be double-faced anymore. I need to heal my other face, to heal my sexuality, but now I can honestly bring all that to God." David describes being a Christian in terms of being "born again" and being connected to the divine. Ed says that to be a Christian is "first and foremost to place Jesus at the center of your life and believe he is

your savior and your God." Frank states, "I have a personal relationship with God. For me it was through the act of receiving salvation through a profession of faith which occurred during my childhood and I later rededicated myself to Christ when I was 12 years old."

Gerry describes a Christian as "a believer in Jesus Christ who follows him basically. . . . Following Christ is doing all that you can do to please him, to live the best life you can and follow Scripture." Similarly, Hal states, "I grew up as an Evangelical Christian and have faith in Jesus to save me from my sins. It's my desire and intention to follow Jesus with my life for better or for worse." Ian describes the sense of connection to Jesus Christ he felt at the church of his childhood: "The church we grew up in has this gorgeous painting of Jesus in Gethsemane and I'm like, 'Wow, he's praying for me,' and it's always been a powerful thing, something I could never deny. It goes hand in hand with sexuality. It's a part of me and it's always going to be there." Jim states that, to him, being Christian "means I am trying to model my life as Jesus did to be as much of Jesus in the world as Jesus was, as much as I'm capable of doing that." Ken describes his sense of deep personal connection to God as helping him to conclude that God blesses gay relationships:

> Basically [my inner crisis] brought me to God very quickly to say, well, to beg, I need an answer on this now. I really need to know what to do. It was a spiritual experience. Initially, it was the most clear presence of God I've ever felt, the most amazing, powerful experience in the midst of my mental turmoil, an absolute and total calm and quiet power that just doesn't come from me, cannot come from me, and it came down to the question for me—the next day, you're asking, "Did that really happen?" Then I had to think, "If that wasn't God, what has ever been God?" And in my experience of personal conversation with God, it was he'll tell me what and I'd do it.

Thus, the participants reported a strong sense of personal relationship with God. It was also common, however, that they ultimately left their churches of origin.

Participants often conveyed a sense that God and Christ are not to be identified with a particular church and that a church's actions are not to be confused with the actions of God or Christ. Adam states, "I see my faith as something that is mine and something that no one else can take from me. Even flat out almost verbal abuse, I don't see Christ in that. They don't know better so they don't do better. It's not Christ abusing me." Hal condemns on Christian grounds the homophobia he perceives in some Christian churches:

> My belief is that they are withholding the grace of God from people they think don't deserve the grace of God. The true Gospel message is we're all sinners and we all fall short, so why is it that one group of people are condemned? That causes a lot of pain for me. It's just so wrong."

Ken, who changed church communities as part of his process of integration, speaks of the church as being a broader reality than any one congregation. He also echoes Adam's sense of the need to separate one's understanding of God from the actions of Christians:

> There is a very strong tendency, unfortunate tendency, for people to totally reject God when it is in fact the church, the people within the church, who have hurt them in some way. . . . I could have chosen to reject a lot more of my upbringing than I did. I could have rejected the sexual morality I was taught. I could have left the church. I could have done a number of things that would have been in excess. I find often people throw the baby out with the bathwater rather than a measured response. People have gotten homosexuality wrong within the church and let's fix that. . . . Leaving . . . was just never

an option for me. To me it was an imperative—how do I reconcile this with God and my

faith. . . . There was no other option. It was what I had to do.

In addition to discussing their separation of their relationship to God/Christ from membership in

any particular church, the participants also spoke of engaging in personal study, developing more

open and flexible attitudes, and adopting a personal, gay-affirming theology based on their

reflection on their own and others' lived experiences.

Personal study. Nine of the eleven study participants referred directly to the importance

of having done their own study of the theological questions surrounding homosexuality. Much

of the study focused on what several referred to as the "clobber passages" of the Bible that have

been interpreted traditionally as condemning all expressions of homosexuality. They indicated a

movement away from biblical literalism and in the direction of factoring in the historical and

cultural contexts of biblical teachings, along with an increased reliance on personal experience

and authority. For example, Charlie states:

When you hold a literalistic view of the Bible, it almost puts God in this little box and I

think that's harmful in some ways because it limits your experience of God. . . . [Y]ou

have to put those things in the context of the culture and time period and language in

which they were written. They were written 3,000 years ago in some cases and the world

they lived in was very different from the world today. They didn't even have the term

"homosexual." That's a modern definition for what we're discussing. . . . I've come to

the conclusion that our understanding of God and our relationship with God evolves over

time and I don't believe everything we know about God is fixed in time in a religious

text. It plays a role as well as our experience and the tradition of the church and reason

and that's the tenets of the Methodist Church, the Wesleyan quadrilateral.

Ed discusses having attended a workshop on homosexuality and the Bible. He describes it as a "light bulb moment." He observes:

> For the gay community in general and Christian community . . . they're not studying the Bible. They're just listening to the pastor and his interpretation. Most people don't read the Bible. They just listen to the pastor. To form my own opinion . . . has been to read the Bible myself and to study it myself.

In addition to acquiring the capacity to re-examine the authoritative texts of the religious tradition in which they were raised, participants also reported undergoing an attitudinal change, one of moving from rigidity and legalism to a focus on love and relationship.

Attitudinal change. A number of participants spoke of having left behind a rigid set of beliefs or a legalistic approach to religion in favor of one that emphasizes love and compassion. Adam states, "Maturing in Christ—it's about loving rather than a list of rules or commandments." Bob says being a Christian is "not about morality or ethics but about being the image of God." Charlie speaks of moving away from a religion based mainly on a personal, eternal reward:

> I was raised in a more conservative Pentecostal tradition and in that tradition being a Christian was about getting saved and making sure your name was written in the Lamb's Book of Life and when you die there would be this place of eternal whatever for you. I have come to believe that that is no longer the main point of being a Christian—maybe a benefit to being a Christian but I do not believe that's the point and that is something that has taken me a very long time to learn for myself and that has taken a lot of soul searching.

Frank relates, "I was able to read more in the scriptures about Christ and Christ's ministry, a more simple faith not complicated with legalism and rules that don't exist in the message that Jesus brought." Gerry speaks of an inner transformation:

> I started thinking for myself and becoming less charismatic per se, less egoistic. Those people now can't accept me even though I learned so much from them. Being a gay Christian I have a fuller understanding of God's grace. It's drawn me closer to God. A lot of people coming out grow further apart from God. I stopped going to church but I didn't stop believing. I still held onto my faith but my faith evolved.

Hal says that there was a strict sense of separation between the church and the rest of the world in his childhood church. There was "always this fear that the world would contaminate the Christian." He comments, "At some point I got a secular job and started rubbing shoulders with other people. I had to loosen some of my judgments and that has changed dramatically over time." He adds that "the gay thing was in some ways an entrée into the whole thing" because of "meeting people who lived very different lifestyles." Speaking of his early faith, Ian states, "I had a very egoistic view through high school and college, very rigid on how to behave. . . . The process of coming out [led me to focus] more on my relationship with God and with Jesus than on trying to fulfill a set of rules." These changes were reflected in participants' willingness to adjust their theological views based on their observation of their own and others' experiences.

Personal conclusions based on observations of experience. Several participants attributed their changed stances on homosexuality in part to their personal reflection on their own and others' experiences. In describing their decision to accept a gay-affirming theology, two of them referred to the concept of "fruits" or "fruits of the spirit," apparent references to a New Testament concept rooted in Matthew 7: 16-20 and Galatians 5: 18-23. Jim speaks of "fruits of

the spirit" when he discusses having participated in Ex-Gay ministry and then attending a

conference of gay-affirming Presbyterians:

> When I went to the Presbyterian lesbian and gay conference, it was very loving. Even
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> though most people's theology didn't match mine, it was clearly a place of God. That
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> slowly started convincing me to accept it. . . . I talked to a lot of people there and the
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> people that were accepting definitely seemed at peace, full of grace, the various fruits of
>
> the spirit, and I don't see that in the Ex-Gay people.

Ken, discussing his conversion to the belief that gay relationships can be acceptable to God,

speaks of good and bad fruits: "Confirmation of all this for me is observing other people's lives

and observing that the fruit of this tree is good and the fruit of Ex-Gay ministries is rotten."

These remarks appear to echo comments shared earlier regarding the negativity participants

came to associate with the Ex-Gay life and the desire to live in a manner that felt emotionally

satisfying. Once they arrived at these conclusions, participants had to work out the manner in

which they would affiliate with both the gay community and the Christian community.

Relating to the gay and Christian communities. As they have worked toward

integrating their gay and Christian identities, the participants in this study have often found

themselves considering how their gayness and Christianity interrelate and how those two aspects

of identity relate to other aspects of their identities. Of the participants interviewed, only one,

Charlie, explicitly includes membership in a gay community in defining what it means to be gay:

> To me, a gay man, being gay, is about the attraction you have to people of the same sex
>
> and as far as having a gay identity, being gay to me is about being part of a culture of
>
> people who are in that demographic of people who have those attractions to the same sex.
>
> Being gay means being part of that culture.

Adam's definition of being gay does not include the broader gay community. He states, "It's more than just being attracted to the same sex. It's being in love with the same sex and not at all attracted to the opposite sex." But he also speaks of sharing the social and political goals of the gay community: " My vision of being a gay man in 2011 is eventually settling down with a partner and having that long relationship that I always wanted but thought I would be denied." The rest defined gayness only in terms of physical and emotional attraction to other men, as the following examples illustrate:

- "I am same gender attracted, nothing more than that. Sometimes I don't identify with the culture. I am a man who loves other men. That's it."

- "[Gay means] preferring male company."

- "For me, to be a gay man is realizing that the core of my sexual identity is that I am attracted to people of the same gender. I'm sexually and emotionally drawn to other men."

- "I like men. I'm emotionally attracted to men, I'm physically attracted to men, and I want to partner with men."

- "I just think of it [being gay] as the attraction, that's where my affections are, that's what I need in companionship, is that male companionship."

- "[It's] not just there's a physical wanting to touch or explore their bodies but their persons, their inner thoughts, their confidence, finding that attractive[.] . . . It's not having sex that makes me gay but my desire to be intimate."

- "It means that I am sexually attracted to other men. That's it."

- "To me gay, I guess, means a homosexual male but I think it can mean a lot of things."

There was a range among the participants with respect to their involvement with the broader gay community. Several have limited or no contact with it. David says he has no experience of the gay community outside GCN. Ken states:

I am sheltered. I haven't had much exposure to the gay community outside the gay Christian community and I did that very much on purpose. It's pretty rare that I will end up—I don't go to gay clubs or bars generally. It's not how I have fun. I don't know a lot of gay people who aren't Christian.

Gerry expresses some reservations about some tendencies he perceives within the gay community:

I have issues with the gay community, with some of the hatred they have toward trans people, towards Christians, their lack of understanding of other cultures, even racism, white gay men. I have friends in the gay community. I don't go to gay bars. The only gay event I participate in is the Gay Christian Network. . . . I'm gay and Christian and a lot of other things and those are just two things that define me.

Ian says he initially felt out of place in the gay community. He says, "I guess I wrongly saw the gay community as more homogeneous than it really is—dress this way, etc. I saw it was a huge tent and a very diverse tent of gay people." Ian relates that joining a gay choral group and making friends with older gay people helped to change his perspective. "I see it as a positive way that somebody can live." At the other side of the spectrum from David and Ken, Jim is active in gay political causes.

One theme that emerged from the interviews was that some participants felt unaccepted in some gay quarters because of their Christian identities. Adam asserts that many gay people

experience even gay-affirming churches as "the kind of abusive thing they ran away from." He says the Christian faith is "certainly not celebrated in a lot of non-Christian gay friends. That's somewhat changing." Bob offers a description of the conflicts he has felt as a gay Christian:

When I say I'm going to GCN, people say, oh, so you're a hater. No, I'm not a hater. I'm a Christian. Americans are so afraid to sound like they're being judgmental. They just make that poker face. They have a whole idea in their minds what it means to be a gay Christian but they'll never tell you. "He's dancing just like everybody else . . . He's not Christian." They have ideas of what it is to be gay and what it is to be Christian and they put it together without telling you. Gay culture—I mean what society understands to be gay—is pretty based [on] club culture and hook up culture and sex culture and the way society sees homosexuals is not matching with Christianity. I don't feel accepted by the gay community, I don't feel accepted by the Christian community, or society.

Charlie offers an explanation for the kind of reaction Bob describes:

A lot of gay people have been hurt by the church. A lot of gay people have experienced psychological trauma in churches and there is a lot of anger. So when I say I'm gay and hold on to Christian beliefs, a lot don't understand that. It's like you're sleeping with the enemy. . . . I've met a lot who don't understand how I go to church as a Christian and a gay man.

Ed shares the reaction he received to his search for a Christian partner:

I can remember when I first started to accept myself as gay out loud and started to date and meet other gay friends. [Small town] people would say, "What kind of people are you looking for?" I'd say, "First off, I want him to be a Christian," and people were like,

"Next! You're not going to find that." I can remember being 18, 19, and saying to myself, "I'm looking for a gay Christian," and saying to myself, "I can't be the only one." The gay community laughs about being a gay Christian. Literally laughs. That has changed over the past 5 years or so largely because of the Metropolitan Community Church and things like GCN.

Hal also speaks of experiencing a negative reaction to his Christian identity:

It was weird to be hanging out with gay people and be talking about God stuff and see the reactions coming back at me, the level of hostility. It was unsettling, like I don't belong here either. The hostility is on both sides of the fence. . . I feel like in some ways I'm a foreigner in both contexts. . . . They [members of the gay community] really don't get this whole God and faith thing that much, so it's hard to not feel like something that's really important to me is understood and appreciated.

Ian echoes the sense of not belonging fully to either community:

[There is] opposition from all sides. It's not easy to be a Christian and it's hard to be gay, as well. You've got two whammies against you instead of one and the Christian culture and the gay culture tend to be subcultures, too. Sometimes I feel like I don't fit in the mainstream and sometimes I feel I doubly don't fit in the mainstream.

In the context of relating to both the gay and Christian communities, several participants spoke about trying to reassure one or the other side that they did not fulfill common stereotypes held of the other group.

One common theme has been an attempt to reassure members of each community that they do not fit the stereotypes held of the other. Adam states, "What's given Christianity a bad

name is they are seen as ultra-judgmental. I try to counteract that one life at a time by showing Christ's love and not judging." Like Adam, Jim speaks of trying to counteract the negative images other gay people have about Christianity. "Part of being Jesus is being Jesus to people so they have someone. We have got different people in the community involved in our church because they have seen different people being Jesus and they're not judgmental." Jim says he does not use the term "Christian" to refer to himself when he meets gay people who are not Christians. Instead, he uses the expression "follow Jesus." This is "so the legalism fundamentalism doesn't come across." Along the same lines, David refers to himself as a "Wohubian," a word he derived from "wonderful" and "human," in order to differentiate himself from the heterosexism and hate he sees among Christians. He says he uses this term as a conversation starter to create dialogue on his views. Gerry says, "There's different aspects of my life. I don't want to be a gay Christian. That's like being a Baptist Christian. I don't want that separation from Christ."

Similarly, some participants spoke of wanting to reassure their fellow Christians that when they apply the term "gay" to themselves, they do not mean to endorse the stereotype by which other Christians might understand that term. Frank shares the following thoughts on being a gay Christian:

It's been difficult precisely because most people associate [gayness] with a hedonistic lifestyle. . . . [It's] hard to separate people's image of me as a person when I come out to them. They don't see Christian first or tend not to. They see me as a gay person first. I want to be a Christian first who happens to be gay apart from any sort of behavior that I exhibit or they see me engaging in. It's just exceedingly difficult for people to visualize me as a Christian who happens to be gay.

Adam also seeks to present himself as authentically Christian: "I see people now that I've known for years that never understood why I was gay and they've accepted it because they know that I'm a Christian. They know my heart and know it's a heart after God. More people in my life are like that. It's changing for the better and will continue to."

Other participants echoed the desire to present their Christianity as their primary identity and their gayness as important but secondary. For example, Charlie asserts, "I don't see myself as a gay Christian. I see myself as a Christian. I think the things Christ taught in scripture transcend sexuality. I see myself as a Christian who happens to be gay." Ed states, "To be gay is innate. I can't take that away. Christian is a choice to me. I always try to lead off the description to say I'm a Christian first and then gay, but they are hand in hand for me."

Some have discovered that they have Christian allies. Ed states, "There is an underlying current in the Christian community about acceptance for gay Christians, but it's just not talked about in groups. You have to make that connection to individual people." A number of participants talked of maintaining close ties with Christians who were nominally conservative but who were personally supportive. The sense that there are gay people who long to be reconnected to God and that there are Christians who are open to gay people appears to have prompted a sense of mission to one or both communities.

Sense of mission. As they have integrated their gay and Christian identities, a number of study participants express a sense of ongoing mission to the church and/or to the gay community. Adam states that the growth of ministries like GCN and gay-affirming churches is having an impact. There are "different types of Christians than we're used to. We're not being told we're going to Hell." This development is "changing the gay community." He believes that as more gay people adopt children, they will start "to realize they're responsible for others, for their

children. Maybe it's calling them back home to the Christianity of their youth." He says it is an "exciting time to be Christian, sort of like the underground church in China. Part of a civil rights movement." He speaks of a "grassroots organic" development, "like there's a revival going on in the gay community." Ian notes a similar trend:

> It's really kind of funny. I talk to people. I'm chatty. I talk to people at the bar about church and I run into a lot of people who are like, "Wow, I've been out of the church for 20 years. I didn't think church could be part of my life. Maybe I want to become part of that. An evangelistic type of thing. . . . Some would like to be back in church and are afraid. The media says all gay people hate the church. It's not [true].

Similarly, Ken asserts, "I think it's a great time to be gay and Christian. So much is happening right now with the growth of the church, capital C, as a whole. I feel like I can be an instrument. I feel like God can use me here."

Other participants speak of small ways in which their lives as gay Christians have provided them with opportunities for service. Gerry tells the following story:

> I was at least 20 when I came out. The first person I came out to was the youth pastor from the church I'd branched off to from my parents. He's an amazing guy and I really believe God put me in his life to come out to him, because three months ago his daughter came out to him. He's probably been the most Christian person. He doesn't understand it. . . . [but] he's shown me Christ's love. In May I'm going to spend a week with him and his wife. I try to live my life as the best example I can so people can come to me, straight people will say, "You're Christian, aren't you?" I don't advertise it. I think that's the best testimony, how you live your life. I'm just thinking maybe I need to get more involved in the gay community so I can be that example.

Ed also articulates the manner in which he sees his experience as opening up a path of service for him:

> For myself, just being acceptable in God's eyes, I accept that my lifestyle or orientation is not acceptable to the Nazarene Church and I accept that Christianity as a whole might not accept that, but to accept myself as a gay Christian, I can love the unloved in society, maybe LGBT community, maybe women just in general, maybe homeless, maybe different races, different religions, Islam, Jewish people that may not be accepted.

Thus, as they engage in the process of integrating their gay and Christian identities, a number of participants speak of sensing ways in which they can help their fellow Christians and/or their fellow members of the LGBT community.

Integration as an ongoing process. A final theme that emerged was that the process of integration is an ongoing one. Of his work toward integration, Adam states, "It's changing for the better and will continue to. Now it's very easy to have both identities; 9 out of 10 [with 10 being the easiest]. Even six months ago, it was a 7. A year ago, 5. Two years ago, I just wouldn't do it." Charlie makes it clear that he does not see himself as having completed the task:

> I have reconciled my sexuality and my religious beliefs but there still is [*sic*] a lot of things that have been left unanswered and I think that's the nature of religion in general. The nature of God is unknowable to me and there's always going to be questions that people have and that will be for all eternity. There's always going to be things I wrestle with and try to find the answer to and that's not just over being gay. There's a lot of other things as well.

Ed describes his life as "initially very segmented and separated." He says he kept his gay friends and his Christian friends separate but "now it's very integrated. . . . Being gay and Christian is me now. It's been a long journey." Hal, a marriage and family therapist, is aware he has some distance to go. He says he has not pursued gay clients "because I don't feel I'm far enough along to separate my own stuff and my own internal homophobia." Jim speaks of the coming out and integration processes as a matter of "evolution."

Conclusion

The participants in this study reported a common chronological sequence of their experiences as gay Christians. As they came to acknowledge having a homosexual orientation, and sometimes as that orientation came to be recognized by members of their Christian communities, they encountered both explicit and implicit forms of rejection. Some isolated themselves from their Christian communities in order to avoid feared rejection. This clash between their Christian identities and emerging gay identities was experienced as tension and dissonance. Several participants reported finding that they initially responded to this dissonance with a period of compartmentalized experimentation with casual gay sex. Others attempted to deny or suppress a gay identity through abstinence, reparative therapy, or participation in the Ex-Gay movement. Some responded in both ways. All of the participants expressed that these initial responses were ultimately unsatisfactory to them. As a result, they chose to pursue integration of their gay and Christian identities. Participants shared that this integration was accompanied by a mental separation of their relationship with God from their relationship with any particular church. They also spoke of engaging in personal theological study, the adoption of less rigid attitudes, and a willingness to adopt a gay-affirming theology in light of lived and observed experiences. Generally, participants reported leaving a church for a more affirming

one. Participants reported a variety of levels of affiliation with the gay community. A number of participants spoke of experiencing some hostility from both the gay community and the Christian community because of their having integrated gay and Christian identities. Several spoke of making attempts to reassure each group that the participant did not conform to the stereotype it had of the other group. Further, for some, integration led to a sense of personal mission to the church and/or the gay community. Integration came to be perceived as an ongoing process.

Chapter V

Discussion

Introduction

The data obtained in this study were consistent with much of the literature on the topics

of gay and religious identity and the experience of gay Christians.   Their potential contribution

lies in the fact that they offer a deeper look at gay men who have integrated their gay and

Christian identities. The data point to a common pattern by which the participants moved toward

this integration. This pattern consists of three major phases. The term "phase" is used here

rather than "stage" because the latter term implies a linear, sequential path toward a set goal

(McCarn and Fassinger, 1996, as cited in Paul & Frieden, 2008). The phases discussed here do

not necessarily proceed in a directly linear fashion. Moreover, they can recur in new experiences

when higher levels of integration have been achieved.

These phases shall be referred to as Initial Dissonance, Initial Response, and Integration

Negotiation. Each phase is discussed below in relation both to the data set forth in Chapter Four

and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. This study will then be considered in terms of its

limitations, its implications for practice, and its implications for future research.

The First Phase: Initial Dissonance

The first phase is Initial Dissonance. In this phase, a member of a Christian community

that disapproves of homosexuality becomes aware of experiencing same-sex attractions. The

data suggest that this incipient awareness involves some initial reflection on the possibility of

one's having a homosexual orientation and may or may not include some kind of same-sex experience. In addition to describing their own early awareness of their homosexuality, several participants also spoke of fellow Christians coming to perceive them as having a homosexual orientation. Ongoing consideration of the possibility of having a homosexual orientation can lead over time to assuming the label of "gay." As one's self-understanding as gay, and possibly the same perception by others, develops, one begins to face the dissonance between one's developing gay identity and one's Christian identity. As Thumma (1991) points out, this dissonance can be powerful because both religious beliefs and stigmatized aspects of personal identity tend to claim core identity status. When two core identities are in conflict, dissonance results.

The experience of dissonance and a felt need to resolve it appears to be key to the process of moving through the three phases of integration. Thumma (1991) framed the changes his gay Christian subjects underwent in terms of cognitive dissonance. As was noted in Chapter Two, he portrays gay Christians as experiencing "two inconsistent cognitive elements" and states that one is sufficiently motivated to attempt change when one "perceives the inconsistency intolerable [*sic*], thus seeking dissonance resolution in some form" (p. 335). The findings of this study confirm Thumma's characterization of the experience of dissonance. As was noted in Chapter Two, the term "cognitive dissonance" implies dissonance on several levels (Alderson, 2003). That was certainly the case for this study's participants.

All of the participants in this study reported belonging to conservative Christian communities at the time that they came to recognize their homosexuality. The dissonance that comes from experiencing oneself as both gay and Christian can be pronounced and can have a devastating personal effect. Sherry et al. (2009) found that a conservative religious upbringing

is related to "higher levels of shame, guilt, and internalized homophobia" for gay people (p.

112). Similarly, Lease et al. (2005) note that internal conflict between religious faith and sexual

orientation is "associated with increased shame, depression, suicidal ideation, and difficulty

accepting an LGB identity" (p. 379). The data presented in Chapter Four illustrate dissonance

within the participants' experiences of rejection or self-isolation in the face of feared rejection. It

is this overall dissonance that appears to have prompted the participants to seek some kind of

solution.

Once the process of exploring the possibility of a gay identity has begun, dissonance is

inevitable for a person who is committed to a form of Christianity that disapproves of

homosexuality. As was noted in the Literature Review, the mere recognition of the presence

within oneself of same-sex desires or behaviors does not necessarily lead to self-labeling as

"gay" (Appleby and Anastas, 1998). Thus, even using the term "gay" in reference to oneself,

which can represent a movement toward personal integration, can prompt an experience of

dissonance for a committed Christian. Once one has reached the point of applying both "gay"

and "Christian" to one's self-identifying descriptors, if both identities make a claim to core status

and one's form of Christianity rejects homosexuality, dissonance will inevitably follow. To the

extent that the dissonance is experienced as minimal or the price of change seems too high, it is

possible that one will simply live with it. The descriptions of their experiences provided by

participants in this study, however, indicate the commonality of arriving at a point where they

found the dissonance to be too great and felt the need to take some course of action.

The Second Phase: Initial Response

It is conceivable that a person who has experienced dissonance could immediately set about working to integrate his or her gay and Christian identities. But that was not the case for the participants in this study. Each recounted some form of response to the initial dissonance that fell short of a deliberate pursuit of integrating the two identities.   Although none of them reported a period of abandoning his Christian faith, some discussed leaving the churches to which they belonged. Some reported going through a period of sexual experimentation in which they experienced casual encounters. A number of participants tried to ignore or suppress their gay identities. That response took the form of sexual abstinence and sometimes the pursuit of reparative therapy or participation in the Ex-Gay movement.

These forms of initial response to the dissonance of gay and Christian identities appear to constitute a discrete phase. While they arguably could be viewed as simply an extension of the experience of initial dissonance, the level of deliberation with which a number of the participants pursued their responses suggests otherwise.

The literature suggests that some gay Christians do not proceed beyond the initial response. Instead, they make it permanent. Such people can establish an ongoing pattern in which they reject their Christianity or their gayness entirely, or compartmentalize the two, as Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) and Dahl and Galliher (2009) indicate. It may be the case that these choices reduce or eliminate dissonance to the point that some people can continue to pursue them indefinitely.   It would be relatively easy to reject one's religious background if that background were not strongly emphasized in one's family of origin, or if one simply had not responded to early religious formation with personal commitment. Or the experience of rejection

could cause a level of bitterness sufficient to motivate one to forsake one's religious heritage. The participants in this study generally reported coming from families active in church life and indicated that they had internalized the faith of their families. Their Christian faith was a central aspect of their lives and rejecting it in favor of a more generic spiritual approach or an entirely secular life does not appear to have been an option for them. A Christian identity appears to have constituted a non-negotiable aspect of these men's identities. Apparently because of the values they associated with their Christian identities, those who attempted compartmentalized sexual lives or who pursued casual sexual contacts ultimately found those actions to be unsatisfactory to them.

Another option some pursued was the attempt to reject a gay identity. Some Christians persevere on this course. Hunter (2010) observes that family and religious influences can be so strong for some people that the price of accepting themselves as gay is too high psychologically for them to bear. Those participants in this study who attempted to deny their gay identities through suppression of their sexual desires, pursuit of reparative therapy, or involvement in the Ex-Gay movement ultimately came to experience further dissonance, however. A common theme in their remarks is that their drive toward emotional and physical connection with other males was powerful and persistent and that they suffered emotionally and even spiritually from its suppression. Furthermore, they perceived a level of unhealthiness in the lives of others who followed similar paths. Several spoke of the Ex-Gay life as one that could tolerate repeated, repented sexual encounters but not sexual and emotional intimacy with a long-term partner, such that the Ex-Gay movement appeared to them ironically to promote promiscuity at the expense of true intimacy.

The participants in this study ultimately found that their initial responses to the dissonance between their emerging gay and established Christian identities failed to eliminate that dissonance sufficiently. Since these participants could bring themselves to renounce neither their faith nor their desire for intimacy with other men, they opted to attempt to resolve the dissonance by pursuing integration.

The Third Phase: Integration Negotiation

Introduction. The third phase is labeled "Integration Negotiation."   This is a deliberate echo of Thumma's (1991) use of the term "identity negotiation" (p. 334).   The concept of negotiation also echoes the insights of Alderson (2003), McCarn and Fassinger (1996) as cited in Paul and Frieden (2008), and Sherry et al. (2009). These scholars emphasize that identity development does not necessarily lead to the same end result for all people, that it is a circular process, and that it involves the complex interaction of individual, familial, and social realities. Integration is understood here in keeping with the concept of the fluid, ever-evolving postmodern self posited by Sherry et al. (2009). Thus, integration is viewed, not as the negotiation of two reified identities, but as the construction of a new identity that encompasses evolving understandings of both gayness and Christianity. This process of construction and synthesis involves a developing understanding of what the words "gay" and "Christian" mean, both in themselves and as applied to the concept of core identity. The data obtained in this study underscored the highly individual and ongoing nature of the participants' pursuit of cohesive selves and the degree to which they had to grapple with the meaning of both the words "gay" and "Christian" for them as they negotiated an integrated identity.

Integration Negotiation is a conscious, deliberate attempt to affirm both gay and Christian identities. Four common characteristics emerged from the data shared by the participants. The

first is what will be called here a "portability of faith," by which is meant the ability to separate

the contents of one's Christian convictions and one's sense of connection to God/Jesus Christ

from one's belonging to a particular Christian congregation or denomination. The second is a

process of developing new ways of understanding and processing one's faith along the lines set

forth in Fowler's (1984) schema of faith development. This process involves a new approach to

studying and reasoning about one's faith, an attitudinal change, and the willingness to make

religious judgments based on observations of one's own and/or others' lived experiences. The

third characteristic is the attempt to grapple with the question of how one's gay and Christian

identities interact. The fourth characteristic is the development of a sense of mission to the gay

community, the Christian community, or both. Each of these characteristics will be explored

further below.

Portability of faith. The fundamentalist or otherwise highly conservative churches to

which the participants were generally exposed during their formative years tended to be

authoritarian, theologically rigid, and clear about their disapproval of self-affirming gay people.

Participants typically found they could not remain in these original worship settings and still

shed the stigma those settings attached to gayness. Thus, the dissonance they experienced was

not with their Christian faith but with the perception of homosexuality by particular Christian

churches. As the data set forth in Chapter Four indicate, participants frequently spoke of having

a personal relationship with God and/or Christ that transcended the ecclesiastical contexts to

which they were first exposed. They mentally separated God and Christ from the actions and

attitudes of their pastors and some of their fellow Christians. They saw their connection with

God and Christ as something that did not depend on a particular congregation or even

denomination. It could continue to bloom elsewhere. Thus, their faith was portable. It could be

transplanted from the original social context in which they experienced stigmatization and replanted in more favorable soil.

Faith development. Faith development, as presented in Fowler's (1984) schema, appears to have been a crucial element in participants' ability to find a way to affirm both their Christian and their gay identities. The data indicate that this development was manifested in several ways. First, participants reported that they began to engage in their own study of scripture and theology, and that they moved beyond a literalistic approach to one that appreciated the historical context of scripture and could engage in interpretation. They became less reliant on others' authority and more willing to engage in an independent analysis of religious resources. Secondly, participants shared that they experienced changes in their religious attitudes. They spoke of becoming less legalistic, more focused on the values of love and compassion, more open-minded, and more tolerant of those who were different from them.

Furthermore, participants reported coming to their own conclusions on such questions as the value of suppressing their homosexuality, or receiving reparative therapy or participating in Ex-Gay ministry, by engaging in a process of independent reasoning that relied on their observations of their own and others' lived experiences. It is significant that several participants framed this increased capacity for independent judgment and acquisition of a sense of inner authority in terms of scriptural concepts to which they alluded. As was noted in Chapter Four, several of them referred to "fruit" or "fruits of the spirit." There are several New Testament passages connected to this concept. In Matthew 7: 116-20, Jesus speaks of knowing the nature of a reality by the kind of fruit it bears. In Galatians 5:18-23, Paul speaks of the fruits of the flesh and the fruits of the spirit and provides examples of each. These ideas are closely related to another concept—the discernment of spirits, which is a Christian spiritual tradition in which

Christians seek to discern whether an idea is or is not of God. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 urges

readers to test everything and to hold on to what is good. 1 John 4:1 speaks of the importance of

testing every spirit. By invoking these concepts, these participants indicated not only that they

had grown in the capacity to exercise personal judgment apart from church authorities, but that

they had come to critique what they had been taught using biblical criteria.

These areas of growth—the increased capacity for personal study, scriptural

interpretation, and independent judgment that was formed using intra-Christian methods,

combined with increasingly open and flexible attitudes and the strong sense of personal

connection to God/Christ that allowed for a portability of faith, all give evidence of development

in terms of Fowler's (1984) schema of faith development. They appear to represent growth from

a pre-conventional level of faith to conventional and even post-conventional levels. This growth

also seems to manifest the development of ego functions (Schamess and Shilkret, 2008) and also

significant progress toward having a cohesive self (Tolpin, 1971). Such inner growth appears to

have an important connection to the ability to integrate gay and Christian identities.

Interaction of gay and Christian identities. As was noted in Chapter Four, the

participants in this study shared a spectrum of responses regarding their understanding of their

gay identity and their identification with the broader gay community. Some were politically

active and avid supporters of the political goals of gay activists, such as legal recognition of

marriage between same-sex partners. Some were active in gay social circles beyond the gay

Christian community, for example, frequenting bars or joining choral groups. Others restricted

themselves largely to gay Christian circles and for one respondent, GCN was his sole experience

of gay community. But just as it was observed earlier that simply applying the term "gay" to

oneself is an act of personal identity integration, to identify publicly with a group describing

itself as both gay and Christian would appear to be a significant step in the process of negotiating

a gay Christian identity. Several participants went to great lengths to explain that their

fundamental identity is Christian, and that gay is a secondary descriptor. One stated that he

avoided the term "gay Christian." While he did not use the term "hyphenated," the context of his

remarks indicates that he did not wish for his Christian identity to be hyphenated by any other

descriptor. These findings appear to stand in contrast to those of Thumma (1991), who reported

that his respondents settled into a "gay Christian identity" (p. 34). On the other hand, the

emergence of a sense of mission, described below, based on one's being both gay and Christian,

may indicate that, while participants' language may have differed from that of Thummas's

subjects, their experiences were not entirely incongruous.

Sense of mission. Another important aspect of Integration Negotiation was the

articulation by a number of participants of a sense of mission derived from their experience as

gay Christians. This phenomenon is consistent with information on gay Christians supplied in

the writings of Thumma (1991) and Hunter (2010). Participants indicated a desire to work to

change the attitudes of their fellow Christians on the topic of homosexuality and also to reach out

to members of the gay community who felt that a Christian life was not an option for them.

Arrival at a sense of mission based on having integrated one's gay and Christian identities can be

seen as a sign of successful integration in that it manifests the opposite of the effects initially

induced by the stigmatization of gay people in some Christian communities. To re-engage with

the Christian community and the gay community on the basis of one's identity as a gay Christian

is to turn stigma into a source of meaning and agency. The participants who spoke of mission

appear to have been transformed from passivity to action, and from a sense of victimhood to a

sense of agency. It comes across as further evidence of the development of an ego (Schamess and Shilkret, 2008) and a cohesive self (Tolpin, 1971). It seems quite possible that the efforts of participants to distance themselves from stereotypes of both Christians (judgmental, hateful toward gays, narrow-minded) and gay people (hedonistic, superficial) might best be viewed in light of this sense of mission. There was a desire to demonstrate to fellow Christians that a gay person can be a person of faith and moral integrity and that being gay does not necessarily imply a life of self-indulgence and casual sex with multiple partners. Similarly, there was a desire to demonstrate to other gay people that a Christian life truly can be an option for them. While these efforts might also be construed as an attempt to be seen as acceptable in the eyes of those communities despite one's gay or Christian identity, and that may in fact be a contributing factor, an equally compelling reason for making the case that "I am not like the others" appears to be the desire to effect change in one or both communities.

Further thoughts on integration negotiation. The three phases described above—Initial Dissonance, Initial Response, and Integration Negotiation—appear to have played out in the lives of all the participants in this study in one form or another. While the second phase does not appear to be logically necessary, it does appear to be common. This thesis adopts the postmodern concept of the fluid self and speaks of phases to indicate that these experiences are not fixed in time but can recur in an ongoing way. As the participants' responses make clear, there is no one way to arrive at an integrated gay Christian identity and there is no one fixed point of arrival. The process is ongoing as one continues to interact with different internal and external factors related to one's gay and Christian identities.

On a related note, this thesis does not offer empirical evidence that integration of gay and Christian identities is the preferred outcome. As Hunter (2010) observes, living with the dissonance that arises from the intersection of same-sex desires and adherence to a conservative Christian faith may be less harmful to some people than the pursuit of an alternative. Moreover, one can reject one's Christian faith and adopt some other form of religious commitment or spirituality, or lead an entirely secular life, and still achieve happiness. Integration of gay and Christian identities may promote personal integration, but is not the only possible path to achieving it. Nevertheless, as was noted above, the process of integrating gay and Christian identities appears to be accompanied by, and apparently made possible by, psychological growth, including ego development and movement toward having a cohesive self.

Just as the process of Integration Negotiation is individually tailored and a work in progress, so too is the research on this topic. The research on which this analysis is based has necessarily been limited in scope and heuristic in nature. It can only arrive at tentative conclusions and then point beyond itself. For this reason, it is appropriate to discuss the limitations of this study.

Limitations

The most obvious limit to the usefulness of this study lies in the area of generalizability. It is a study of eleven men out of 400 members of a 15,000-member online community of self-identified gay Christians. Moreover, these were men sufficiently invested in that membership to travel to Denver, Colorado to participate in a conference. Additionally, they are members who had arrived at a level of comfort with their experiences as gay Christians to be willing to discuss their personal lives with a stranger. Attendees at the conference were apparently self-selected

based on two criteria—a high degree of investment and motivation, and the financial ability to travel to the conference. It is thus likely that gay Christians of more limited means are underrepresented here, as are gay Christians at relatively lower levels of having integrated their gay and Christian identities.

All the participants identified as having come from a conservative Evangelical context and many were raised in fundamentalist churches. Only one was raised as a Catholic, and he later joined an Evangelical church. Thus, Catholics, Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox, and men raised as Mainline Protestants are significantly underrepresented here. It is not clear in what manner or to what degree the findings and analysis set forth above would apply to gay adherents of those denominations. All the participants in this study identified primarily as white. Thus, members of racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented. Because this study has deliberately focused only on gay Christian men, the applicability of its findings to the lives of lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered Christians is unknown. Additionally, it is not clear to what degree this study would describe the experiences of gay adherents of non-Christian religions.

Finally, in order to obtain the ability to recruit potential participants using the GCN website, the author believed it was necessary to join GCN. (There was also a genuine desire to do so.) The author recruited participants as an "insider," a fellow self-identified gay Christian man, using the website, and also by approaching attendees at the conference in order to obtain a greater number of participants. These methods reduced the randomness by which participants were recruited. They may also have limited the sense of objectivity and distance that might ordinarily be part of such interviews. The fact they were talking to a fellow gay Christian may have prompted them to describe their experiences in terms they believed would be acceptable to another gay Christian. On the other hand, the author's self-identification may have increased

participants' level of comfort and willingness to self-disclose to an individual they would consider likely to empathize with their experiences.

Implications for Practice

Social work practice with clients wrestling with the intersection of gay and Christian identities can be complex for several reasons. First, as was noted in Chapter Two, religious systems make claims regarding the nature of ultimate reality that defy verification or falsification by the hard sciences or the social sciences. Secondly, the social work value of self-determination mandates respect for a client's choices regarding religious beliefs, moral values, and his or her relationship to his or her sexual orientation. Thus, a practitioner is in a position neither to weigh in directly on the truth or falsehood of religious teachings nor to prompt the client to abandon or alter his or her religious beliefs. At the same time, the practitioner is bound to promote the optimal mental health outcome achievable for a particular client.

As was observed above, the process of integrating gay and Christian identities appears to be concomitant with healthy psychological development. In light of this finding, it would seem appropriate for practitioners to help facilitate the integration negotiation process solely on mental health grounds, without respect to their position on religious questions. A thoughtful attempt to negotiate an integrated identity is likely to be most achievable for a client who is able to develop in terms of Fowler's (1984) model of religious development, keeping in mind that, as was noted in Chapter Two, that model can represent an imposition of values through its clear implication that fundamentalist forms of religion represent a lower level of faith development. But to the extent that clients can acquire the ability to develop a sense of their Christian faith as something "portable" in light of a personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ, to critique their earliest forms of faith, to interpret scripture, to move from rigidity and legalism to a more flexible and

open-minded engagement with the world, and to subject the anti-gay teachings of their churches to a biblical critique based on the "fruits of the spirit" test described above, they will be better positioned to view their gayness in a new light and then to make a free choice as to how they wish to proceed. Furthermore, an experience of validating community, such as GCN, appears to be quite helpful (Hunter, 2010).

Hunter (2010) speaks of developing these capacities using a variety of therapeutic tools, including group therapy, Socratic questioning, addressing cognitive distortions, rational-emotive behavioral therapy, narrative therapy, and referral to support networks and affirming theological literature. Hunter recognizes that the price of losing one's sense of fitting in with one's church and family and of living in a manner consistent with one's earliest religious beliefs may be too high for some clients, for whom suppressing their gayness may be the least harmful choice (pp. 85-87). It should be noted that GCN offers support not only for gay Christians who believe God blesses same-sex relationships but also for gay Christians who believe the biblical message requires them to remain celibate, though all eleven participants in this study expressed the view that gay relationships are acceptable (GCN, 2011).   As Hunter points out, a therapist can offer a client who is deeply conflicted about his or her homosexuality on religious grounds a "safe environment in which the client is free to explore the many challenging questions associated with identity conflicts" (p. 87). Without attempting to impose one's own religious views on a client, Hunter asserts that a practitioner is still "responsible for providing accurate information and suggesting alternative courses of action" (p. 87).

Clearly, a practitioner cannot force upon a client the development of those skills and qualities to which this study has pointed as helpful in facilitating the move toward Integration Negotiation. But a practitioner can create the kind of holding environment in which a client's

story can be heard, a client's pain can be acknowledged, and a client can be encouraged to view him or herself through a lens of compassion and revisit his or her Christian roots to see if they might yield a greater possibility for integration and inner wholeness than the client had previously been able to imagine.Implications for Future Research

In light of the limitations of this study enumerated above, there is a clear mandate for further exploration of the themes raised here. It would be helpful to use both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the applicability of the integration model set forth above to a larger, broader, and thus more representative sample of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians, and LGBT adherents of other religious traditions as well. Future research could seek to identify the protective factors that promote the achievement of a cohesive self through the integration of nonconforming sexual or gender identities with membership in religious traditions that are disapproving of gay, lesbian or transgendered identities. It would also be interesting to develop a model for assessing the interplay of religious influences with other social and familial factors as gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons pursue the integration of sexual and religious identities. It would also be helpful to acknowledge the multi-faceted spectrum of possible Christian and other religious responses to sexual identities and to assess their impact on the quest of gays, lesbians, and transgendered persons to participate in communal religious affiliations. Other potentially fruitful research might explore the effectiveness of different therapeutic interventions in assisting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons in navigating the development of their sexual and gender identities in the context of disapproving religious formation and other forms of social obstacles that make the development of a cohesive self difficult for them.

This study stands on the shoulders of a great deal of previous work. Nevertheless, it is only a beginning. Hopefully, it will be a fruitful one. Like the Biblical patriarch Jacob, the participants in this study have refused to release their wrestling partner, in this case their Christian faith, without a blessing. Their path has been a difficult one and they have sometimes been wounded along the way. But, like Jacob, they have been blessed with symbolic new names—the integrated identities that have allowed them to change from victimhood to agency, to develop psychologically, and to move toward the achievement of cohesive selves.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Posting

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR STUDY ON GAY MEN'S INTEGRATION OF GAY AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITIES

Hello! My name is John Reardon and I am studying in the Masters in Social Work program at the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, MA. I am a gay Christian and I am studying the ways in which gay Christian men integrate their sexual and religious identities. I am looking for 12-15 gay Christian men age 18 and up who speak English and are planning to attend the GCN Conference in Denver in January and who would be willing to meet there for up to 60 minutes and tell me their stories. If you are interested, please contact me at on this site at XXXXXXX. Thank you!

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant:

My name is John Reardon. I am a graduate student studying for a Masters in Social Work at the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, MA. I am studying the ways sexual and religious identities intersect in the lives of adult gay male Christians. I am doing a study that involves research as part of my thesis requirement. Later on, I may use the information I collect for other presentations or publications.

I am seeking men who are 18 years of age or older, who speak English, and who identify as both gay and Christian, to help with this research. I am asking each participant to meet with me for an interview of up to 60 minutes at which I will ask them to discuss their experiences of being gay and Christian. If you agree to participate, we will meet in a mutually agreed upon place where you will feel comfortable discussing these matters. I will audiotape the interview. Later on, I may transcribe all or part of it. If I get someone to help me transcribe it, that person will sign a confidentiality agreement.

You should be aware that there may be some risks to you in participating in this study. You are being asked to talk about sensitive personal information that may stir up unpleasant emotions. I will ask you to think ahead of time of a person—possibly a therapist, pastor, or friend you can turn to if participating in the interview has been upsetting for you. I will also give you information that will help you to contact a mental health professional if you feel the need to do so.

On the other hand, you may find that participating in the interview is a positive experience for you. It may give you the chance to gain new insights on your experiences. Also, you will be potentially contributing to greater understanding of gay Christians by therapists, pastors, and other people who seek to help others.

Every effort will be made to preserve your confidentiality. You will not be identified by name or by specific geographical location with anything you say that becomes part of the study. My advisor will have access to the data, but without any information that would identify you by name or by where you live. All data I collect will be kept in a secure location for three years as required by Federal guidelines. Data stored electronically will be protected. If I still need the materials after three years, I will continue to keep them in a secure location and will destroy them when I no longer need them.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question and you may withdraw from this study at any time during the interview or within 30 days of the interview. If you choose to withdraw, any materials connected with your interview will be destroyed. If you have any further questions or wish to withdraw, you can contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx. You can also call the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974 if you have any concerns about your rights or anything about this study.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant: _____   Date: _____

Researcher: _____   Date: _____

Appendix C

HSR Approval Letter

SMITH COLLEGE
School for
Social Work

Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950
F (413) 585-7994

December 1, 2010

John Reardon

Dear John,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and everything is fine. We are glad to give final approval to your study and do want to add that we appreciate your very thoughtful work throughout this process.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your very interesting project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Bruce Thompson, Research Advisor

Appendix D

Interview Format

The research question for this study is: How do men who label themselves as both gay and Christian go about the process of attempting to integrate their religious and sexual identities?

The following questions will guide the interviews, allowing for elaboration and clarification, as appropriate:

1. Tell me what it means to you to be a Christian.
2. Has this changed over time?
3. How has the fact that you're gay been viewed or received by the Christian community?
4. Tell you what it means for you to be a gay man.
5. Has this changed over time?
6. How has the fact that you're Christian been viewed or received by the gay community?
7. What is it like for you to identify yourself as both gay and Christian?