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When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians

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The pseudonymous Sheila Larson is well known among sociologists of religion for having coined the term "Sheilaism" to refer to her personal belief system — an individualistic religiosity that has concerned many social commentators. Recently, however, authors such as Wuthnow (1998) and Roof (1999) have suggested that the various forms of religious individualism may be advantageous for some. Working from interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians and former Christians, this article contributes two new angles to such discussions by 1) arguing for a more nuanced understanding of individualism as a tool or tactic rather than as the diametric opposite of religious communalism and 2) exploring the role of such individualism in the lives of those who are forced into it.

> I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.
>
> — "Sheila Larson," in Robert Bellah et al.'s *Habits of the heart*

> Today I am a very spiritual person not involved or a member of any church. My spiritual expression is part and parcel of who I am. . . . We are spiritual beings living physical lives. Some of these lives (like this one) happen to be gay! It is certainly a challenge but what great rewards of courage! My life and sexual identity has strengthened my character and made me feel more whole as a person.
>
> — Lesbian survey respondent, 1998

When Robert Bellah and his colleagues wrote *Habits of the heart* in the mid-1980s, they were concerned with the ways in which their country's historic legacy of individualism had developed in the past few decades. To them, the "expressive individualism" exemplified by Sheila Larson's "Sheilaism" smacked of self-absorption, of a disaffiliation from community that they also saw in many

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other areas of respondents' lives. And indeed, for decades sociologists tended to view such individualized religiosity as evidence of a dire decline in the importance of religion in general in the United States (Weber 1992; Berger 1967; for a discussion, see Warner 1993). Yet of late sociologists and historians too are conceding that the increase in individuality within the religious sphere may in fact herald not a decline but simply a shift in the "spiritual landscape," as Martin Marty (1998) has called it. Recent works have focused on the wide-ranging beliefs encompassed under the currently popular term "spirituality," seeking to understand not only their attractiveness but also their importance in the lives of people in the United States, and elsewhere, today.

This re-evaluation of religious individualism as a whole also has heralded a shift in definition: while a distinction may still be made between those who primarily attend congregations and those who primarily do not, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the individualism exemplified by Sheila Larson, who could not remember the last time she went to church, is also influential in the religious lives of those who just went last week (or who went to shul; c.f. Dufour 2000). "Sheilaism," then, or rather religious individualism more broadly, no longer can be understood as a single, clearly bounded religious profile, but rather is one of many strategies that are employed to a greater or lesser extent by those both "religious" and "spiritual." While Sheila Larson herself was not a member of a congregation, forms of spiritual bricolage similar to hers can be found today among the members and occasional attendees of numerous religious organizations.[1]

To date, however, discussions of religious individualism have centered primarily around the issue of choice: given an open religious market, for example, what factors influence a person's choice of religion or spirituality, and how does that choice affect her? Little attention has yet been paid in this area to those whose religious and spiritual options may be restricted in this supposedly open market, but such studies would be extremely fruitful. What happens, for instance, when a committed believer is forced out of his chosen religious group or denied entry to traditional organizations? What happens when his choice of religious affiliation is challenged by other members of that group? In sum, how does the growth of religious individualism affect the religiosity and belief structures of those who adhere to such individualism as much by necessity as by inclination, and how do those whose religious identity is denied or challenged by leaders and communities re-integrate the sundered aspects of their self-image?

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[1] Since some of the people who participated in this study are "churched" and others are not, it should be emphasized that I am using Sheila Larson rhetorically here, as an exemplar of religious individualism. While some of the participants in this study — the one quoted in the epigraph, for instance — express their "spirituality" in ways remarkably similar to Sheila's, others use religious individualism as a strategy that allows them to *remain in* congregations rather than keeping them out. I wish to broaden and complicate our understanding of what Sheila Larson represents, and thereby find a far more useful analytical tool than the fairly strict binary of individualism and communalism presented to us by Bellah and others.

This article presents some of the results of a study designed to examine such issues in the context of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Christians and former Christians. Working primarily from seventy-two in-depth interviews that were conducted in 1998 with pastors, members, attendees, and former affiliates of two Metropolitan Community Church congregations, I explore the variety of strategies utilized by study participants to integrate their religious and sexual or transgender identities. After discussing these processes in depth, the article returns to theoretical approaches to religion and identity in order to explore the broader ramifications of enforced individualism.

BACKGROUND: RELIGION AND INDIVIDUALISM

Although the decline of traditional, organized religions in the U.S. has been a topic of sociological concern for decades, it is only recently that the opposite side of this trend — the growth of religious individualism — has received serious and concerted treatment. Two notable works on the topic are especially relevant to the issues addressed here: Robert Wuthnow's *After heaven* (1998) and Wade Clark Roof's *Spiritual marketplace* (1999).

Wuthnow argues that during the latter half of the twentieth century, religion in the U.S. underwent a shift from a "spirituality of dwelling" to a "spirituality of seeking." The former, he explains, is exemplified by the concept of a "spiritual home," usually a congregation and sometimes also a building or geographical location in which people experience spirituality and a sense of permanent "sacred space." In the latter, on the other hand, "status is attained through negotiation. A person does not have an ascribed identity or attain an achieved identity but creates an identity by negotiating among a wide range of materials. Each person's identity is only understandable through biography." "Self-definition" is no longer reliant "on the statuses that institutions confer" (1998:9-10).[2]

In exploring the potential assets of a "spirituality of seeking," Wuthnow discusses two participants in his study whose life experiences have differed somewhat from the norm: one is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, while the other had a father who was manic-depressive and alcoholic. These two, and others like them, he argues, "have been jarred out of socially acceptable ways of living and thus cannot create a self by playing the roles prescribed by social institutions. If their lives are to have coherence, it must be of their own making" (1998:147). Among LGBT people in the U.S. today, the experience of coming out does not always "jar" one "out of socially acceptable ways of living." However, it generally does at least raise questions regarding one's social acceptability, and it certainly suggests to the heterosexual world a drastic change in *something* — at the very

[2] It is worth noting that the key issue for Wuthnow is not so much one's attendance record at a religious congregation, but the role that congregation plays (or does not play) in one's religious identity.

least, an assumption or attribution of what Goffman (1963) termed a "stigmatized" or "spoiled" identity. Certainly within the confines of Christianity, coming out still tends to call into question the validity of one's Christian identity. One MCC pastor, for example, told me that when she came out to her parents, her mother's first words were: "I thought you believed in God!" (pastoral interview 2a). The message here, as in the lives of many other Christians who come out, is that one cannot be both LGBT and Christian. In such cases of uncertainty about or direct challenge to one's place in the social order, the societal shift toward religious individualism may facilitate LGBT Christians' efforts to create coherence between their religious and sexual or gender identities.

Wade Clark Roof provides additional insight into this shift toward the "spiritual." In *Spiritual marketplace*, he suggests that the relatively new term "lived religion" is helpful in understanding the current conglomeration of institutional and personal beliefs and practices in the United States (1999:41).[3] Roof outlines three central aspects to lived religion: scripts, practices, and human agency. Scripts, which for LGBT people can be either negating, affirming, or neutral, come from the religious group in which a person was raised, the teachings of his parents, his partner's current beliefs, ideas embodied in the culture, and so on. Thus, Roof argues, spirituality is never entirely an individual issue because it is inevitably shaped by surrounding institutions and influences.

Practices, too, Roof suggests, are rooted in community, even if they are performed by the individual. They may link that individual, however tenuously, to her community, but they also reinforce scripts, influencing belief through action, mind through body. Lest we find ourselves in a Gramscian world where hegemonic discourse and praxis determine individual belief and identity, however, the third aspect of agency enters to complicate the other two. Roof explains: "People make choices, selectively engage scripts and practices, reflect upon themselves as meaning-making creatures. In this process biography and faith traditions interact to produce discursive strategies toward religion" (1999:43). In other words, "it becomes necessary to carry on a creative dialogue with tradition" (1999:169). Echoing Wuthnow, Roof continues: "And in so doing, individuals configure new spaces for making meaning and engage in a process of interiorizing and authenticating their own affirmations" (1999:166).

The conflict between LGBT identity and traditional Christian views of gender and sexuality clearly poses a "human dilemma" or even an "existential concern" (Why me? What does my life mean? How am I to live? Or more to the point: Can I really be lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender *and* be an upstanding person?) for those involved in this study. Yet, Roof's and Wuthnow's works point toward an important strategy for solving such dilemmas: rather than being

[3] As Roof notes, the term "lived religion" has its origins in a book edited by David D. Hall (1997). Note the mixing of communal and individual religious strategies suggested by Roof's text.

a rule book, religion has become a resource, to be utilized when it is expedient and ignored or rewritten when it is not. As one bisexual man explained to me: "I take from the Bible what I can use, and I disregard a lot of what I can't use." (interview 1154).

This "biblical buffet" strategy has been noted in other groups as well. Using the term "sifting" to describe the process of selective religious identification, Lynn Resnick Dufour (2000) recently explored identity construction among Jewish feminists. She identifies three major types of resultant identity —inclusionist, transformationist, and reinterpretationist — that resonate well with the various reinterpretations of Christianity produced by participants in this study. Most important here, however, is the process by which those in Dufour's study integrated their Jewish and feminist identities. Dufour explains:

> Sifting is a process by which many people construct cohesive, non-conflicted identities out of potentially conflicted ones. This process involves trying-on various practices and attitudes of a given reference group, evaluating them based on one's personal values, needs, or feelings, and then either identifying with them or "screening them out" of one's identity (Dufour 2000:104).

Like the feminists in Dufour's study, the LGBT people discussed here sifted through the "practices and attitudes" of Christianity in order to assemble a Christian identity that could be integrated with their LGBT identity.

METHODS

The study from which this article is drawn (Wilcox 2000) was conducted over the course of roughly four years (1995–1999), with the most intense fieldwork and most of the interviews taking place during the summer months of 1998. Initial fieldwork was conducted in California at five Metropolitan Community Churches — member congregations of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), a Christian denomination that ministers primarily to gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people. Two of these five congregations were selected for the intensive phase of the project in 1998. Located within an hour's drive of each other, the two churches are otherwise quite different, representing in some ways two extremes of the unusual theological diversity present in the denomination. While one congregation is urban, metaphysical, and male-led, with a mid-sized, predominantly male congregation, the other is suburban, charismatic, and female-led, with a very small but almost entirely female congregation.

Because the UFMCC has extremely lenient doctrinal and ritual guidelines, the denomination includes a wide range of theological approaches and ritual practices; there is little "MCC culture" that is consistent across congregations. For this reason, studying a single congregation imposes a greater selection bias than it might in other denominations; one risks the impression that all MCC

members are metaphysical, or charismatic, or theologically conservative (or liberal), for example. Although studying a wide range of MCC congregations was not possible within the scope of this study, the selection of two very different churches partially offset this potential bias.

To further broaden the study's scope, interviews were solicited through each congregation's mailing list rather than through announcements during or after services. While this might make little difference in churches that purge their lists fairly frequently, these two churches keep mailing lists that extend far beyond their current and recent members. As a result, I was able to contact people who had simply called the church at one time for information, who had attended a public lecture there, who had come to services once or twice several years previously, who were allies of the church but not attendees, and so on. Consequently, the results presented below are not limited to current or even former members of MCC. However, the vast majority are focused on LGBT people who are current or former Christians.[4] Including interviews with the four pastors involved in the study, a total of seventy-two semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on participants' religious backgrounds, experiences with coming out, connections between religion and LGBT identity, and current religious beliefs and practices. The responses indicate that despite respondents' current and/or former involvement with MCC and other religious organizations, it was not the religious community but rather religious individualism that played the key role in resolving the tension between LGBT and Christian identities. The next section explores the strategies utilized by study participants in managing this tension.

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[4] Three participants, all women, had never identified as Christian. Two of these women considered themselves "friends of the church" who supported it but did not attend; the third attended because her partner was heavily involved. Five participants were heterosexuals who attended MCC for a variety of reasons. Interviews were nearly evenly split by gender, with 34 women (two of whom are male-to-female transgender) and 38 men (none transgender) participating. Four participants identified as bisexual and two as "questioning" regarding their sexual orientation. Most of the participants were white (84.3 percent), reflecting a racial imbalance in the congregations and in fact within the denomination as a whole; ten percent identified as biracial or multi-racial, and the other 5.7 percent included a Filipina, a Latino, and a Native American. For more in-depth demographic information on the study, see Wilcox 2000.

Although the number of bisexuals and transgender people in this study is quite small, and the challenges faced by these two populations differ somewhat from those faced by gay men and lesbians (whose challenges also differ from each other), there are enough similarities between the strategies employed by bisexual, transgender, lesbian, and gay study participants on the one hand to warrant including all four groups in the results.

RESULTS: IDENTITY, THEOLOGY, AND COMING OUT

Essentialism

One area in which religious individualism can play a key role for LGBT Christians is that of identity. Many Christian communities still consider LGBT identities[5] to be false perversions of heterosexuality; some Protestant organizations are still highly conflicted on the matter, while the Catholic church accepts the reality of "homosexual" orientation but considers its expression sinful. These teachings are, or have been, a source of extensive soul-searching for many in this study; the ability to "sift" them out is thus critical to resolving the tension between religious and LGBT identities.

Pointing to the claim of UFMCC founder Troy Perry to have been gay since ovum and sperm first met to form him, R. Stephen Warner (1995) has argued that essentialism may be a critical strategy for LGBT Christians.[6] Persuaded by this argument, but also aware of the existence of anti-essentialist tendencies in some feminist cultures, I asked during interviews whether participants believed themselves to have been born LGBT or whether that identity had developed over the course of their lives. Most people did not even let me finish the question; by the time I finished saying "born" they were nodding, and some jumped in with an "absolutely" or a "definitely." Many followed this assertion with supporting statements such as stories from early childhood which emphasized greater affiliation with the same sex, gender identification with the opposite sex, or simply a sense of difference.[7] A few women claimed their lesbian or bisexual identities to be chosen, and several people mentioned the possibility that sexual identity could perhaps be a choice for others.[8] Some frankly told me

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[5] Or "homosexuality;" many disregard bisexuals and transgender people in their discussions of these issues.

[6] Warner links this essentialism to what he sees as a "Pentecostal" theology in the UFMCC. Though Perry himself was a minister of the Church of God in Prophecy before he came out, and his Pentecostalism has certainly left its mark, the denomination as a whole is far too loosely structured to be theologically pigeonholed. While it certainly contains charismatic and theologically conservative congregations, it also has metaphysical churches and even a few that have been heavily influenced by the Goddess movement.

[7] It is difficult to argue, of course, that such memories are reliable proof of the early existence of LGBT identity. While it is quite possible that transgender and minority sexual identity begin to manifest (or be socially constructed) at an early age, it is also likely that coming out functions much like religious conversion: the radical shift in identity encompassed in the transition necessitates a re-reading of the past in a way that supports the development of the new identity. On religious conversion, c.f. Dawson 1998.

[8] Vera Whisman (1996) reports that a greater number of women than men in her study claimed their homosexual or bisexual identities to be chosen. While this is strictly true for the present study as well, here the differences are weak. Moreover, it was the non-Christian and less strongly Christian women in this study who were more likely to claim choice in their sexual identity. This adds the nuance of religious context to Whisman's analysis: while feminism and gendered differences in social power make a constructivist view of identity more accessible and plausible to women than to men, she argues that other influences can lead women

they did not know what the roots of their sexual or transgender identity might be, and a few who believe in reincarnation suggested that their souls might have chosen to be born LGBT in order to broaden their experiences. For the vast majority, however, essentialism reigns supreme.

Warner suggests that essentialism removes blame and guilt from LGBT people and their parents. In a similar vein, Diana Fuss (1989) has argued that in certain situations and with certain types of essentialism, an essentialist view of identity can be both empowering and politically expedient. Beyond these arguments, however, for religious members of the LGBT population there is an even more powerful reason to embrace such a self-definition: the current religious debates over "homosexuality" are predicated on exactly this question. Most anti-LGBT religious groups consider minority sexual or gender identity to be a false identity, brought about through bad influences, misperceptions, poor upbringing, or even demonic interference. The emotional pain associated with identity crisis in many LGBT Christians is interpreted by these groups as indicating that LGBT identity is akin to an illness and that its sufferers are therefore in need of healing. Among the anti-LGBT Christian groups, only the Roman Catholic church has stated clearly that homosexuality is an inborn trait, and to my knowledge it has not weighed in officially on the subject of bisexual or transgender identity.

In response to claims that their identities are freely chosen, LGBT people often point angrily to the oppression suffered by many of their group, asking what the rewards might be that would influence so many people to choose to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Moreover, many LGBT Christians from conservative backgrounds say that their own inability to change has disproven their churches' doctrinal stance that LGBT identities are optional and can be rejected. Thus, although it is theoretically quite logical to assert that there might be an aspect of choice or social conditioning to LGBT identity, for many of the people in this study choice is simply not an option.

While recent genetic studies have given essentialists a strong platform on which to stand when claiming the inborn nature of LGBT identity, those in this study have a second argument at their disposal: God. In an age and among a group in which scientific and religious beliefs hold equal sway and are often intertwined, the use of both to argue for an essentialist identity is doubly powerful: it lends credibility within both rationalist and religious circles. Carolyn Walker Bynum (1987) has suggested that claims of direct contact with God bestowed an authority on medieval Christian visionary women that would otherwise have been denied them. Likewise, in contemporary Christian circles a claim to have been created lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender by God is much stronger than a claim simply to have been born that way. The latter can still

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to claim an essentialist understanding. In this case, essentialism is a much stronger defense than constructivism against claims that sexually active lesbian and bisexual Christian women are "living in sin."

lead, as it does in the Catholic church, to a position that such identities are harmful proclivities. While the former could still imply a testing by God rather than the granting of a valued identity, it obviates the need for exorcisms, "healings," and other painful results of the anti-LGBT constructivist position.

Those who believe their identities to be God-given offer two diametrically opposed interpretations of this fact; which one is relevant to an individual probably depends on how positive her experiences have been as an LGBT person. For some, the identity is a test or a trial. Miguel, a gay Latino who was raised within the Salvation Army, says that he is "a firm believer that God made me gay," but he continues to be puzzled by passages in the Bible that he interprets to mean that homosexuals are condemned by God. "I can't believe that God would have made me this way simply to condemn me," he told me.

Miguel's ambivalence appears in another way, too. "I believe that God gave each of us a gift," he explained, "and at the same time he gave us a cross to bear. . . . I believe that God gave me the cross to bear of being gay." However, the gift that accompanies the cross is also present in his life, as he makes eloquently clear. When I asked Miguel whether he felt that being gay was good, he thought for a while, sighed, and then responded:

> I feel that if I wasn't gay I wouldn't be as sensitive to people — to the needs of people and to the hurt that people have. I feel that all of this is from my gay side. . . . I look at a tree blowing in the wind and see more than just that. I see the symmetry of the tree. I see the leaves as they shimmer. You know. And I think those are all part of my gay nature, a sensitive, more tuned-in side of me. . . . I accept being gay and I really value it — you know, as something very important to me. . . . But I just go through this dilemma of what is the purpose of my life as a gay person if I'm already condemned (interview 1282).

For Miguel and for others like him, LGBT identity is "a cross to bear," even if it comes with advantages. For some, however, the gift comes without the cross. One man, for instance, believes that God helped him to come out, in answer to his prayers to "know myself better." And a few people explicitly told me that their LGBT identity was a gift from God. Margaret and Cynthia, a couple who are peripherally associated with MCC and claim a pluralist spirituality rather than a Christian identity, discussed this issue when I interviewed them. In the conversation quoted below, Margaret was trying to explain her understanding of the connection between spirituality and sexuality, which both women had emphasized in their surveys. Cynthia helped her along:

> Cynthia: Do you mean that . . . you are who you are . . . as an expression of Spirit?
> Margaret: Yeah, that's what I mean. . . .
> Cynthia: Part of that is being a lesbian, and so it's a holy and sacred thing.
> Margaret: It's a holy thing. It is sacred.
> Cynthia: Is that what you mean?
> Margaret: That's what I mean. . . . That I am sacred, because . . . I'm an expression of God. . . . I always laugh to myself when I see a sign that says, "We are an open and

> affirming congregation," because I feel like I don't need anyone else to tell me that I am a child of God (interviews 1051 and 1052).

In cases like this, the imagery of God becomes even more important. Not only can LGBT Christians claim their identity to be genetically determined; not only can they claim it to be God-given; but the additional claim that it is a sacred gift makes LGBT identity something not just to be endured but to be celebrated. Importantly for the case being made here, nearly all of the participants in this study report having reached such conclusions individually. Some never attended church again after coming out, while others began at some point to attend supportive congregations such as MCC; in these cases, however, the congregations served to support and refine ideas already formed individually.

This raises the question, then, of the interaction between participants' theology and their essentialism. Several answers to this question have been given above. However, in understanding how the participants in this study connect their sexual and religious identities, it is essential to explore in depth both their images of God and their answers to the supposedly "anti-gay" biblical passages.

Theology

Understandings of God varied widely among those I interviewed. Many from the metaphysical church described a mystical and often immanent deity. Others who had found that church too theologically liberal for their tastes espoused a more traditional theology. For some, God is a father; others think of God as "parent" or "mother/father." And some spoke more loosely of an energy, a flow, a life force, the Universe. Few images, however, were monolithic, and none could be described as formulaic or doctrinal.

Several people included a negative component in their understanding of God: a statement of what God is not. Most common among these characteristics that explicitly did *not* describe God was "judgmental." God also was described as not damning, not angry, not petty or vindictive, not gendered, not anthropomorphic, and not "the great big daddy God of the Christian Bible that we were raised with" (interview 1277). Many of these negative descriptions reject traditional images of God; some of them reject theology that is used against LGBT people, who may feel as Miguel does that both the church and the Bible teach God's condemnation of them.

If God is not any of these things, then what *is* God? Though respondents rarely agreed on this question, there was one aspect that received overwhelming support. When I asked what the most important characteristics of God might be, the response was often both immediate and concise: "love." Some people elaborated; Jeffrey, a gay, white man in his thirties, told me, "I really believe . . . that our God is a loving, accepting God, for who we are. . . . Exactly how we are. And it's that love and acceptance that draws us to Him . . . and helps us to love

Him back" (interview 1155). Others were more succinct, like Lacey, who said: "For me, God is love." She paused. "That's it" (interview 1197). Metaphysical or traditional, mystical or parental, many of the images of God that respondents described shared this aspect. No matter what their religious background, upbringing, or current congregation, respondents seem to have focused their attentions on definitions of the divine that would most easily support LGBT self-acceptance.

Another important aspect of God, expressed more frequently by those influenced by metaphysical teachings, was God's immanence. Respondents described God as omnipresent, as being always nearby, being "in the world," or even being in each person. Walter, a gay man who has been involved in MCC for over fifteen years, shared with me the following:

> My understanding of God is spirit, and it kind of never — never kind of ends, and I consider that each and every one of us, our spiritual self is connected with God and kind of is all intermingled. . . . We often hear the universe is one, that there really is only one spirit and we are all part of that spirit. And I do think that that's very true, because I feel so connected to so many people, especially within this church — and outside the church too (interview 1108).

Such an understanding of God has several implications for LGBT people. First, it means that God can be present for them in a very real way both during and after the coming-out process. Second, the aspects of love and immanence can be combined to lead to the conclusion that God loves everyone and is present in all people and all relationships. Third and most radically, if God is not only ever-present but is actually present *in* each person, as Walter suggested, and if each person is made in the image of God, then God could be understood, at least in part, to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

Though no one actually made this connection, I had a fascinating conversation with another gay man, Marc, about its possibilities. When we met in his office at a local research facility, he told me the following: "My concept of God is all that there is. . . . It's bigger than anything that I can conceive of. And that God had this image of — of wanting to materialize itself. And this is the result. . . . I am 'I AM' in my own way, the living Christ."

I responded: "Seems to me that would be an incredibly strong affirmation of being gay. To consider that you are part of the living God and that means all of you, including your gayness. . . . Do you experience it that way, or is that just an interpretation I'm putting on it?" He laughed, somewhat uncertain, and stumbled through an answer.

> Well, yeah, that was — um, it was interesting, 'cause as I was listening to you, it sounded, um, a little foreign to me. Um — but, it sounded like something that — and I don't know — you know, if I sat and thought about it that it was there — but it was like, 'Well, of course.' But it felt — in a way it sounded like I was hearing it for the first time. And, um, maybe that's what I needed to hear."

He paused, then concluded, "I guess — so I think I — I maybe have never really heard that. I may have felt it, or lived it, or been it, but not associate — given it a definition. But it made perfect sense" (interview 1182).[9]

It is not surprising that even a metaphysically inclined person like Marc, someone who already envisioned himself as the image of God, would never have thought of God as encompassing homosexuality. As Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has pointed out (1994), the sexuality of God is adamantly avoided in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus's sexuality became important for some medieval women mystics (Bynum 1987, 1991), and metaphors of marriage and sexual fidelity appear in Puritan religious discourse (Porterfield 1992), but each of these contexts remained explicitly heterosexual.[10] More recently, with the resurgence of paternal images of God in traditional religious contexts, sexuality has again retreated from the divine image. Yet as Margaret and Cynthia pointed out earlier, such an all-encompassing vision of divinity has the potential to sacralize sexuality, thus providing an eminently powerful affirmation of LGBT identity.

Exegesis

The wide range of divine imagery utilized by participants in this study is paralleled by the equally wide range of tactics for dealing with the "anti-homosexuality" texts in the Bible. As the arguments for and against such interpretations of these texts are generally fairly well known, I will confine my discussion here to exploring how those arguments are mobilized by study participants.[11]

One might assume, especially given the theological liberalism of both MCC congregations in this study, that most of the interview participants adhere to a metaphorical understanding of the Bible, taking what they can use and "sifting out" the rest. However, despite the liberalism of the churches they attend now, there are people in this study who still treat the Bible as the word of God. How, then, do they reconcile their acceptance of LGBT identity with these texts?

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[9] This interaction raises interesting questions regarding the researcher's role; see Wilcox 2001 for an in-depth discussion of these issues.

[10] Though it is possible to argue for homoeroticism in the visions that male mystics had of Jesus during the medieval period, that homoeroticism was sublimated under the understanding of Jesus as a mother. On this issue, see Bynum 1982.

[11] The UFMCC publishes a small book (England 1998) that outlines each of the biblical texts in question and refutes anti-LGBT interpretations of them, using many of the strategies described here. The original sources of these arguments can be found in the works of such scholars as John Boswell and John McNeill. Some study participants read Boswell, McNeill, or other pro-LGBT theological sources before beginning to attend LGBT-supportive congregations; others arrived at such congregations fairly confident that they could be LGBT and Christian, but unsure of how to address the apparently anti-LGBT passages of the Bible.

The answer lies in a moderate approach to the Bible. Refusing to read it as metaphor, literature, or a useful but optional resource, these people instead rely on the sacred texts' historical and cultural context as an explanation for their "sifting" process. Mandy, a lesbian in her late fifties, put this approach most clearly: "I believe that the Bible is God's divine word," she told me while her young grandson piled toys in her lap. "However, in order to put His word in black and white, God had to use people." She chuckled. "All of these things that make up me, I'm going to read into or see into whatever work I'm doing. So it's the same with those who wrote and then eventually translated the Bible" (interview 2050).

Others who wish to continue a modified literalist reading of the Bible point to the fact that Christians do not follow any of the other Levitical laws; therefore, they argue, it is hypocritical to apply one of those laws to LGBT Christians without also requiring that Christians abstain from pork, wear only fabric made from a single type of fiber, and so on.[12] Some also point to the fact that there is no record of Jesus himself saying anything about homosexuality.

More liberal readers argue that homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender identity as we know them today did not exist when the Bible was written. They offer arguments based in historical interpretation: that words translated as "homosexual" really mean "temple prostitute," for instance, or that they refer solely to man-boy relationships. And quite a few make things even simpler: they ignore the texts, preferring to rely on their own experience of God's love and acceptance rather than on a book that, in their view, is the result of centuries of oral tradition, centuries more of transcription, and several translations. Carrie, for instance, is a lesbian who went through years of trying to change her sexual orientation before she finally came out. Now, she says, "I still have immense respect for the [Bible] because I feel all in all, you just eat the meat and spit out the bones. So I don't take every single thing — I just read it, and I let the Spirit guide me to the meaning" (interview 1217). Anti-LGBT passages, in Carrie's opinion, are simply bones to be tossed in the trash.

WHEN SHEILA'S A LESBIAN: ESSENTIALISM, INDIVIDUALISM, AND LGBT CHRISTIANS

When "Sheilaism" and religious individualism are strictly understood, they are often taken to be a sort of religious dilettantism, lacking any recourse to community resources. Certainly this sort of religiosity might be useful to some

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[12] Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 declare male homosexual activity to be *to'evah* and prescribe the death penalty for those convicted of such activity. *To'evah* is variously translated as "an abomination" (more traditionally) and (more recently) "ritually unclean." Some note that Levitical texts also prescribe the death penalty for such transgressions as adultery, incest, bestiality, and insulting one's parents.

LGBT people, though no research on this topic has yet been published.[13] However, a fair number of LGBT people continue to be involved with religious communities of some sort; while many communities now welcome LGBT people (or at least gays and lesbians) without question, far more continue to turn them away or welcome them only in order to "heal" them. In such a climate, religious individualism would seem to be an essential strategy for those who value both their LGBT identity and their religiosity. Perhaps, then, aspects of Sheila Larson can be found even in congregations.

The concept of "sifting" suggested by Dufour, for instance, is highly applicable to the participants in this study. Those who were attending the most theologically conservative churches while coming out changed not their opinions of homosexuality, not their opinions of organized religion or spirituality, but their attendance. Faced with ideas that negated their newly claimed identities, they neither argued nor capitulated, but simply left — thereby definitively sifting such ideas out of their religious beliefs. Yet this process was not simple. Self-definitions (essentialism) and a variety of independently defined theological positions, not to mention exegetical strategies tailored to each person's view of the Bible, also lent themselves nicely to the eventual integration process.

"Self-definition," Robert Wuthnow has argued, "is . . . more contingent on one's own thoughts and feelings than on the statuses that institutions confer" (1998:10). That this was so in the late twentieth-century United States was fortunate for the people in this study. I noted above that Roof has suggested three key aspects of this individualized form of "lived religion" (1999:41). In the context here, Roof's "scripts" are the teachings, both positive and negative, of the religious groups in which LGBT people have been involved. They are also, however, seed images that sprout plants never anticipated by many religious authorities. From these seeds come images of God and Jesus, and understandings of the Bible, that affirm and celebrate LGBT identities. The "practices," of course, are those learned in religious training: services, yes, but more importantly, prayer. People learned to talk to God, and when their lives reached a crisis point, they turned to a personal relationship with the divine rather than to a human being. Ultimately, they recalled, God did not let them down but instead let them know, sometimes even in words, that they did not need to change.

Roof's third aspect explains how these religious resources were reclaimed and reinterpreted in so many different ways and by so many different people: agency. In a culture in which people "selectively engage scripts and practices" and "reflect upon themselves as meaning-making creatures" (1999:43), and where many Christian churches continue to be unwelcoming to LGBT people, it is not surprising to find individuals forging their own paths to self-acceptance and spiritual wholeness. Faced with an immense crisis of identity, these people turn

[13] However, see Wilcox (forthcoming) for preliminary observations based on such a study.

to their religious resources, sifting through them until they find an answer to their dilemmas. Some were prepared with the answer before the question was even posed; others thought they had found an answer but decided later that it was the wrong one. And a few are still searching, certain the answer is out there but unsure where to find it.

This study thus contributes a new point of view, a new angle of analysis, on religious individualism: the questions of choice and agency complicate both our explanations and our evaluations of this phenomenon. Moreover, although only a few studies to date have focused specifically on long-term strategies of identity integration among religious LGBT people (cf. Mahaffy 1996), a number of studies have pointed to the critical importance of identity integration. Moshe Shokeid, for instance, has described New York's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah as a place for "restoring [one's] cracked self-image and identity" (1995: 239). Leonard Norman Primiano (1993) has spoken of the importance of "vernacular religion" for the identities of lesbian and gay Catholics. And most recently, Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) have noted the importance of identity integration and have called for further study of this process (see also Thumma 1991; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams 1994). Thus, although the importance of the specific strategies described in this article will vary with religious background, current beliefs, and so on, there are clear indications that the importance of identity integration and the role of religious individualism in the process will be confirmed by future studies.

Furthermore, the individualism evident in respondents' strategies exists despite the fact that most either have been or are currently involved in a religious community. Some attend weekly, others a few times a year; a few now find their spirituality in solitude. But by attending to this complexity rather than sorting religiosity into dichotomous categories, we can see the role of individualism in the "lived" or "vernacular" religion of religious attendees and nonattendees alike. For those whose identities collide sharply with official religious doctrine, the increased flexibility of individual belief and practice, along with the growth of congregational, denominational, and religious shopping and switching, can be of critical importance — and from their experiences there is a great deal to be learned about contemporary forms of religiosity.

Bellah and his colleagues never reveal Sheila Larson's sexual orientation; most readers probably assume she was heterosexual. Had she been a lesbian, she might have seen little contradiction between her highly personalized, love-based beliefs and her sexual orientation. However, if she was not a lesbian, she was among the vast number of people in the United States for whom religious individualism — "spirituality" — is an option, a new and perhaps more fulfilling route to explore. For many LGBT Christians, such individualism is a necessity, without which they would remain trapped in doctrinally-ordained closets. This difference in urgency may be an important variable in the study of religious individualism; conservative Christians who are LGBT may be more likely than

their heterosexual co-religionists to display aspects of individualism, for example. Religious individualism also provides one answer to the puzzle of LGBT people who remain in conservative religious traditions — LGBT Mormons, Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, Southern Baptists, and the like — and yet retain a positive self-image. This added complexity in the study of religious individualism thus provides much food for thought and many possibilities for further study.

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