



Queer Spiritualities

Questions for week 6

- How do people navigate the intersections between their spirituality and faith and their queerness?
- What challenges do queer people of faith encounter within their religious communities?
- How do culture, race, class, and religion intersect here too?

Look at essential readings in week 6 reading list. In the following slides, I'll focus mainly on the article by Brenda Beagan and Brenda Hattie (2015) and will use quotes from their research participants who spoke about the relationship between their queer identities and their faith. I've also peppered quite a few videos throughout this slide show, all of which are linked to under the week 6 module.



Why this matters

“There is now compelling evidence that conflict between sexual or gender identity and religious teachings can significantly damage the psychological and emotional well-being of LGBTQ individuals” (Beagan and Hattie 2015, 94).

People’s spirituality and faith matters to them – it can be a huge part of their self-identity. And their queerness is also an intrinsic part of who they are. So when these two areas of their lives and their identities clash, this can have a detrimental effect on their emotional and psychological wellbeing.



When faith and queerness collide

Queer people of faith regularly encounter dominant heteronormative and cisnormative discourses within their religious communities.

- ‘My sexuality has been a big problem in my life. It has been a source of secrecy, a source of liberation, a site of experimentation, but almost always a site of distress and conflict owing to the conservative attitudes of my religion, family and culture’.
- ‘You get taught if you don’t follow this path of righteousness, you’re going to hell...[I feared] that there was some horrible deity that was watching, and just waiting on an opportunity to come down on you like a ton of bricks’.

As we see in the Beagan and Hattie article, queer people have very different experiences of navigating their sexuality/gender identity and their faith:

1. Some people may feel compelled to reject their queer identity (through external or internal pressure)
2. Some may choose to reject their religious identity
3. Some may compartmentalize their queer self and religious self
4. And others may find ways to integrate their queer and religious selves (spiritual bricolage).

Let’s look at some further examples from Beagan and Hattie’s research that reflect all four of these responses.



Rejecting (or redefining) one's queer identity has emotional consequences

- 'There wouldn't be a day that I wouldn't pray to God that this desire would be taken away'.
- 'I really believed that in God's sight, I must be an awful person'.

For some queer people, their queerness becomes a source of personal pain – something to be ashamed of, something they wish God would “take away” from them. Their queer identity becomes a marker of their sinfulness, or their failure in God's eyes. This may be reinforced by family or members of their religious community.

This can have a serious impact on their mental health and wellbeing (as well as their physical health).

Watch this [video](#) by Vicky Beeching about her own struggles accepting her queerness as a conservative Christian.

Rejecting your religious identity – feeling let down by religion

- 'I've never understood why anyone would want to be part of the Church, once they've come out . . . A faith that so thoroughly disowns me, why on earth would I want to be part of that?'
- 'I was asking God to sort out my gender issue, and of course it wasn't happening ... I was going home one day and ... I stopped on the pavement, you know, and I'm like this [shaking fist] at the sky . . . “You've got all the answers for everybody except me!” . . . God and everything just faded out of my life at that point.'

For some queer people, belonging to a religious community that makes them feel ashamed of who they are becomes intolerable. Faith and queerness become seen as an 'either-or' option, and compromise is impossible.

Religious communities become sites of conflict, or unsafe spaces, or places associated with rejection, intolerance, ridicule, and shame. So the queer person leaves.

Watch [video](#) by Malky Weisz, who eventually left her Hasidic (ultra-orthodox) Jewish community. Also [Abby Stein](#) (a trans woman) left her Jewish community (and her role as a rabbi) to become a trans activist.

Minefields to navigate

Religious communities may be very heteronormative, or gendered, spaces – so activities and worship are hard to navigate for queer and trans people. For example:

- Some places of worship have separate seating areas for men and women – so where does a trans/non-binary person sit?
- Groups, rituals, practices may be reserved only for men **or** women
- Practical issues, e.g. access to toilets in the place of worship
- Awkward conversations about pronouns, name changes, being seen with a same-sex partner, or talking about them to other community members.
- The religious institution may refuse to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies
- Heteronormative and cisnormative language used in worship
- Doctrines and teachings may be explicitly homophobic or transphobic
- Family and friends may pressure a queer person to stay 'in the closet' when they are participating in religious community life.

Can you think of any others?



Rejecting your religious identity – grieving what is lost

'I'd never felt so alone in my life, and I'd never felt so unsupported in my life, once I started coming out and once I was confronted ... I lost a lot, when I needed them the most ... It really felt like my heart broke, because there was nothing there ... I think that I still haven't gotten over the break-up'.

'There's no God and that's that and it was sad, like a divorce, or death.'

Grieving what is lost (cont.)

Leaving a faith community (and faith) is not always easy. People may experience a huge sense of loss, disconnection, and grief – loss of faith, loss of God/gods, loss of community. They may also feel:

1. Feeling lost, groundless – without their faith, a person may lose their sense of direction in life (their moral compass), as well as any hope they may have had in (e.g.) an afterlife, nirvana, heaven, atonement, having a higher power to talk to etc. For many people, religion grounds them in everyday life – it shapes how they live their life, it gives the answers to life questions (e.g. how to cope when bad things happen, how to live a ‘good life’, how to treat others). So when they lose their faith, they lose this grounding too.
2. A loss of community and support networks – faith communities can be a huge presence in peoples’ lives.
3. A loss of family connection – for some people, their faith is one of the ways they connect to their family (and friends). Family relations may already be strained by coming out as LGBTI+, and this strain is heightened if the person leaves their faith community too.

Separating faith from the religious community

- ‘I feel like I have a really strong spiritual health . . . identifying with my Jewish identity in a really strong way and having that spiritual practice ... I’ve been able to negotiate and find other ways to maintain my Jewish community and my Jewish identity outside of religious institutions.’
- ‘I have exactly the same beliefs I had all my life ...but there’s no mediator. There’s no church telling me how I connect with Him. It’s so liberating’.

Some people will leave/reject their religious community but hold onto their faith – so they let go of the institution that rejected them and find new ways to practice their faith by themselves.

This can feel liberating – the person still has their faith, but discovers they can practice it in ways that allow them to retain a strong sense of who they are.

Compartmentalizing one's queer self and religious self

- 'I used to have to segregate it in my body, in my mind. It'd be like, "okay, with my gay friends, I do gay things ... And with my Christian friends, we talk about Christian things and Biblical things and conservative things." ... Segregation makes a person crazy'.
- 'I always kept my distance because I always felt like some day it's going to come to pass, and I'm going to change gender and ... these people [in her religious community] aren't going to agree with it.'

Some queer people choose to stay in their religious community, but "in the closet" – they keep their queer lives and faith lives separate.

But as the first quote above indicates, that's not always easy (particularly when one's queerness becomes "visible", such as when a trans person begins the transition process, or a queer person wants to get married).

It may also have a negative impact on a person's mental wellbeing – having to be "on their guard" when in their place of worship, or unable to talk openly and honestly with others in their faith community.

Listen to David Norse's [TEDx talk](#) about his own journey, from compartmentalizing to fully integrating his faith and queer sexuality.

Queer community responses to queer people of faith

- 'They say don't tell your Christian friends you're queer and don't tell your queer friends you're Christian. Because people see those two worlds as separate'.
- 'Both "sides" often act as if you're betraying them and not being fully and authentically one or the other by acknowledging that you are both. The biggest misconception is that you can't be both LGBT and of faith, that they are mutually exclusive'.

For some queer people, the need to compartmentalize also arises in their queer community too – queer friends may be suspicious about religion, or challenge a person's membership of a queer-intolerant institution. There is 'too much stigma and fear of being judged' for queer people to risk talking about faith and spirituality in the queer community.

A former colleague once told me (Caroline) that it had been harder to 'come out' to her queer friends about being Christian than it was to 'come out' to her Christian friends about being queer. Her queer friends could not understand why she'd even want to be part of a community that did not accept who she was.

Integrating your queer self and your religious self

As Dag Ølstein Endsjø notes (see last week's reading), some religious communities have attempted to become more welcoming to the LGBT+ community:

- LGBTI/Rainbow Christian and Jewish movements have developed in the 1970s (though these were not always accepted within their wider denominations).
- Muslim gay movement Al-Fatiha founded in 1998 (in UK, Canada, US, South Africa). Other queer Muslim movements also exist in mainly Muslim countries (e.g. Indonesia, Palestine, Turkey).
- Hindu activists have attempted to return Hinduism to its more tolerant (pre-colonial) roots.
- Check out the [video](#) on queer Jewish youth and the support network (JQI) created in New York to support them.
- These movements create community, and also argue for compatibility between faith and queer lifestyle, **based on their religious texts and traditions**. So they challenge the veracity of homophobic and transphobic intolerance as a legitimate part of their faith traditions.
- This has been impacted by LGBT+ activism in wider culture, and changes in secular laws and attitudes.

Not 'either-or' – but both

- 'People presume if I'm actively LGBT+ and proud of it that my faith is not overly important to me. The assumption that you can't be both is made by both communities. In reality, I really care about my relationship with God and my faith.'
- 'Leaving my faith group was not an option for me. I had to learn how to reconcile the two [faith and sexuality] as essential parts of my character and identity. I am no more gay than I am a Christian, no more a Christian than I am gay'.

Watch this short [video](#) by Adi Alouf – a queer Jewish woman who embraces her faith and her queerness – and another [video](#) by queer Muslim activist Wazina Zondon who talks about navigating and ultimately embracing her two identities. And Saba Choudr

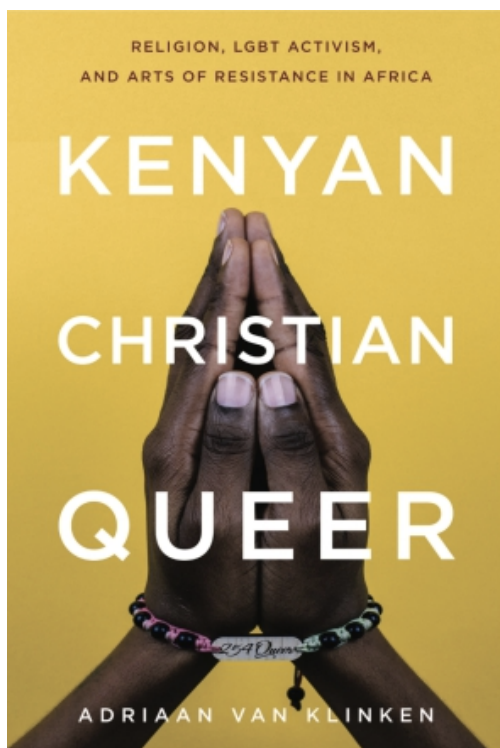
Historian and mental health activist Blair Imani has done a [TEDx talk](#) about the intersection of her Black, queer and Muslim identities. Also see the [TEDx talk](#) by queer, trans Muslim Saba Choudrey.

God welcomes (and creates) queerness – challenging heteronormative discourses

- ‘I believe that sexuality is a God-given gift. God created me a homosexual person and that is not to be hidden.’
- ‘If you really go into the scripture, the homophobia and transphobia of the church has no basis in Jesus’ teachings’.
- ‘I now know that God loves me regardless, so I trained to be a role model so I can tell the world and other LGBT people that GAY actually stands for ‘God Adores You’.

For some queer people, there is no conflict between their queer identity and their faith. They are able to integrate both these parts of their life together.

Over the past few decades, studies in queer theologies and queer scriptural interpretation has helped to shape and foster this move towards integration of faith and queer lives. Here are some examples, and we will come back to this topic in week 10.



Adriaan van Klinken’s recent book explores the ways in which religion can be a critical site of LGBT activism in Africa. As a queer, African Christian himself, Adriaan draws on his own experiences to discuss the issue on personal, academic, and political levels.

Without denying Christianity’s contribution to the discrimination, and exclusion of queer people in Africa, he discusses the artistic and creative ways that queer Christian grassroots activists in Kenya attempt to transform the imagination and foster inclusivity and resistance to oppression through engagement with their faith.

You can read more about Adriaan’s book [here](#), and watch the trailer to a related documentary [here](#) (which has only just been released)

We will look at some of Adriaan’s other work in week 10.

Joy Ladin

Joy Ladin is a Jewish trans woman, whose work includes biblical scholarship, theology, and poetry about her trans, Jewish identity.

She reads the Hebrew Bible texts through a transgender lens, reflecting on her own experiences and faith, and finding resonances in the biblical texts with her own trans identity.

You can find out more about Joy [here](#), and listen to a podcast interview she did [here](#).

Her website has heaps of resources on it, which showcase her integration of trans activism and theology.



Elijah C. Nealy

Elijah is a social worker and academic working in the area of transgender mental health (particularly trans youth). His article “Who do you say that I am? Transforming promiscuity and privilege” (in your reading list) lays out so clearly how trans (and wider LGB) identities intersect with issues of class and race too. Reflecting on a New Testament text, he focuses on a common ‘slur’ aimed at queer people (their ‘promiscuity’) and reclaims it as a Christian imperative to offer compassion and care ‘promiscuously’ to those whom the faith community often marginalizes and condemns.

LGBTIQ+ affirming faith communities

Some faith communities actively and openly welcome LGBTIQ+ people, ensuring that they are not only 'tolerated' but also 'affirmed' as valuable members of the community.

Some examples of affirming Christian communities in NZ can be found [here](#).

Rabbi David Meyer (a synagogue leader in the USA) has preached and [written](#) about the Jewish imperative to include trans and non-binary people in their communities.



Final thoughts

At the end of the day, a person's queer identity is part of who they are, it is part of their spirituality. Faith can be hard to navigate for the rainbow community and for some folk, this is a source of huge unhappiness. For others, it's something they can work through and find answers to. Some people might feel abandoned by one group but discover a new community and sense of belonging somewhere else. There is no right or wrong "way" for queer people to relate with their faith and spirituality. It has to be what feels right for them.

Exercise

Some of you may belong to a faith community, others not. That doesn't matter for this exercise. We'd like you to think about how a religious congregation (church, synagogue, temple, etc.) could make itself more welcoming and inclusive for its queer members. Think about this in terms of:

- Practices, rituals, events, worship
- Messaging, language, imagery
- Community involvement
- And anything else you can think of!