The Meanings and Manifestations of Religion and Spirituality among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adults

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Abstract The present study employed a mixed method approach in the effort to explore religious and spiritual practices among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, as well as the meanings ascribed to the terms religiosity and spirituality by LGBT adults. Data were collected via a cross-sectional survey consisting of open- and close-ended items among 498 LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) identified individuals attending an annual Pride event in a large northeastern city. Both quantitative and qualitative findings suggested that consistent with other studies, spirituality was defined largely in relational terms (e.g., in terms of one's relationship with God and with self). Religion, in contrast, was defined largely in terms of communal worship and in terms of its negative influences in the lives of individuals and communities. For this sample of LGBT persons, spiritual identities were more pronounced than religious ones, and this pattern may be explained by their understanding of the spiritual self in relation to prosocial engagement and interconnectedness with others, the world around them, and the universe. Further, religious affiliation and practices were explained, in part, by the religion in which the individual was raised, level of educational attainment, as well as the developmental stage in which the person is currently situated. The findings highlight the reality that a substantial number of LGBT individuals may remain committed to religious and spiritual life, which may be related to a motivation to make sense of one's place in the world especially in light of societal misunderstandings and intolerance to LGBT individuals.

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Introduction

Data from national surveys demonstrate that the majority of adults in the United States self-describe as religious. Seventy percent of Americans report that they attend religious services at least once per year, and 90% engage in private acts of devotion such as prayer (Davis et al. 2005). The frequency with which Americans engage in public as well as private acts of devotion serves as evidence of the importance of religion in the lives of Americans. However, the importance of religion in American life is also evident in the ways in which Americans incorporate religious and spiritual beliefs into everyday life. Religion and spirituality inform the content of Americans' political beliefs and their patterns of political participation (Calhoun-Brown 1996; Greenberg 2000; Harris 1994; Reese and Brown 1995; Wood 1999), and their level of engagement in pro-social activities (Hodgkinson, Weitzman, and The Gallup Organization 1996; Loveland et al. 2005; Mattis et al. 2004a; Wuthnow 1991). Religion and spirituality also guide the ways that people operate in the private spheres of life. For example, these belief systems influence Americans' health (Chatters 2000), psychological well-being (Ellison 1998; Kus 1992; Maton and Wells 1995; Yakushko 2005), efforts to cope with adversity (Mattis 2000;

Pargament 1997), and sexuality (see Brewster et al. 1998; Douglass 1999 for example).

Although religion has a powerful influence over various aspects of the private sphere of life, sexuality has always been one of religion's most important sites of influence (Olson and Cadge 2002; Petersen and Donnenwerth 1998). Religion and religious doctrines inform social norms regarding what constitutes acceptable patterns of sexual intimacy, these ideological systems also define who constitute an appropriate sexual partner, and outline the consequences of violating religiously sanctioned or socially sanctioned sexual customs. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals—whose patterns of affection and intimacy, partner choices, and sexual identities challenge conventional norms—religion and religious communities often have been hostile spaces, and their efforts to integrate religion, spirituality, and sexuality often are wrought with conflict (Greenberg and Bystryn 1982; Goodwill 2000; Schuck and Liddle 2001; Rodriguez and Oullette 2000; Sullivan-Blum 2004). The antagonism with which many religions approach sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, has contributed to a legacy of silence about the spiritual and religious lives of LGBT individuals. The consequence of this silence is that we know little about the broader context of the faith lives of LGBT persons. In particular, we know little about the relative importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of LGBT adults. We also know little about the ways in which LGBT individuals conceptualize or enact religiosity and spirituality. This work serves as a corrective to the present gap in knowledge. Using a multi-method (quantitative and qualitative) approach, we first examine empirical data on patterns of subjective, organizational, non-organizational religious involvement among a sample of urban-residing LGBT individuals. Next, we present the findings of a content analysis of the written narrative responses of LGBT adults to questions about the meanings of religion and spirituality. Finally, we explore the implications of the findings.

Religion, Spirituality and Gay Identities

Religious communities and religious individuals vary in their ideological approaches to homosexuality (i.e., in the extent to which they cast homosexuality as "deviant," "sinful," or "normal"), and in the degree to which they affirm and embrace individuals who are members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender communities. Yakushko (2005) notes that religious institutions and individuals may take one of four approaches to homosexuality. Some may take a "rejecting punitive" stance in which they construct homosexuality as inimical to the tenets of their faith and as inherently sinful. These institutions take an openly hostile

and rejecting stance toward LGBT persons. Other institutions adopt a "rejecting non-punitive" stance in which they construct homosexual behavior as sinful/deviant, but embrace LGBT individuals. Some institutions take an approach that is described as "qualified acceptance." These institutions imagine homosexuality to exist on a hierarchy of acceptable and unacceptable sexualities. In this hierarchy, homosexuality is imagined as acceptable (or "tolerable") but as inferior to heterosexuality. Finally, some institutions take an approach that is fully accepting homosexuality and LGBT individuals. The "full acceptance" approach imagines homosexuality to be one of many acceptable and normative expressions of human intimacy, and LGBT individuals are welcomed unconditionally.

Those individuals who are a part of welcoming and affirming faith communities may experience little or no conflict between their religious beliefs and their sexual identity. In contrast, empirical research suggests that exposure to non-affirming or castigating religious and spiritual rhetoric may lead LGBT individuals (especially those raised in religiously conservative environments) to experience conflict between their sexuality and religiosity and to struggle with internalized homophobia. This internalized homophobia may delay the development of an authentic and integrated sexual orientation, and may result in a quest to "pass as heterosexual" (Wagner et al. 1994). Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) add that although some LGBT persons respond to hostile religious tenets by developing healthy integrative identities, others may resolve the conflict between their sexual and faith identities by rejecting their homosexual identity or by compartmentalizing their identities (separating gay and religious identities).

In addition to research that delineates the ways that religiosity may shape sexual identity, there is a corpus of work that examines the ways in which LGBT individuals' faith lives (e.g., their worship practices) are altered by their experience within hostile or affirming religious communities. Some LGBT individuals elect to eschew organized religion. Among this group, some individuals self-define as atheists while others may reject public religious life, but may express their religious and spiritual commitment by engaging in such private acts of devotion as meditation and prayer (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Yip 1997). LGBT individuals who remain committed to participating in organized religious life may choose to disregard or minimize the relevance of anti-gay doctrines and sentiments within their faith community (Dworkin 1997; Mahaffy 1996).

Taken together, extant research reinforces the reality that among LGBT individuals public and private expressions of faith are influenced by the tensions between religiosity and sexuality. This research also raises important

albeit unresolved questions about the ways in which religiosity and spirituality are defined and conceptualized by LGBT individuals. These concerns about definition and conceptualization are crucial given that LGBT persons often craft core elements of their identities (faith and sexuality) in contexts that are hostile to them.

Definitions of Religiosity and Spirituality

To date, there is no consensus on the definitions of the terms religiosity and spirituality. Berdyaev (1939) noted that the word spirituality has been deployed as a synonym for the existence of divinely created life-forces, the "soul," consciousness, reason, and wisdom. Potts (1991) defined spirituality as individuals' belief in the existence of sacred force that inheres in all things. Elkins et al. (1988) defined spirituality as a pattern of living that results from a recognition of a transcendent dimension of life and that manifests in beliefs and values related to self, others, nature, life, and a higher power. Elkins et al. (1988) theorized nine components of spirituality: a transcendent dimension; meaning and purpose in life; mission in life; sacredness of life; material values; altruism; idealism; awareness of the tragic; and "fruits" (i.e., beneficial outcomes and rewards). The extent to which these social scientific definitions are consistent with the conceptualizations of religiosity and spirituality held by LGBT persons remains largely a matter of conjecture.

Although the meanings of the terms "spirituality" and "religiosity" remain unclear, research suggests that these terms name distinct albeit overlapping experiences, beliefs, and values (see, for example, Mattis 2000, 2002; Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Importantly, scholars have begun to explore the distinctions that members of various ethnic and religious communities make between religiosity and spirituality (see Mattis 2000 for example). However, at present, little is known about the meanings that are constructed of these terms by LGBT persons. Because LGBT individuals often construct their religious and spiritual beliefs and identities in religious communities that are hostile to them, the conceptualizations of religion and spirituality held by these individuals stand to complicate existing dialogues about what it means to be religious and or spiritual. Therefore, in the effort to expand existing research on religion and spirituality, in this study we address three key research questions. First, in what public and private acts of devotion do LGBT adults engage? Second, to what extent do LGBT adults distinguish between religiosity and spirituality in quantitative measures of these constructs? Third, what are the meanings that LGBT adults ascribe to the terms spirituality and religiosity?

Methods

Study Design

Data for this cross-sectional survey of religiosity and spirituality were collected at a large Northeastern Pride festival. Individuals who expressed an interest in the study were invited to a data collection booth where they completed a paper-and-pencil survey, which included self-report quantitative assessments as well as two open-ended qualitative items. Although our goal was to gather data from LGBT persons, all individuals who expressed interest were permitted to complete a survey. In order to capture the widest possible spectrum of attendees, surveys were administered in 2-h blocks throughout the morning, afternoon and evening. All participants received a movie theater voucher as an incentive for participating.

Of the 658 completed surveys, we retained a final sample of 498 for the present analysis. The excluded participants were removed from the data set because of incomplete data regarding sexual orientation ($n = 56$) or because they were identified as heterosexual ($n = 90$). Further, because we were interested in individuals with clearly established sexual identities we excluded 14 participants who indicated that they were "not sure" of their sexual orientation. These individuals were defined as "questioning."

Quantitative Measures

The measures included in the quantitative analysis were as follows:

Sociodemographics. Participants were asked to self-report on sexual orientation ("lesbian or gay," "bisexual," "straight/heterosexual," "not sure," or "other"), gender (male, female, transgender, other), race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and annual income.

Religious Affiliation. Through two forced-choice questions, we asked the participants the following, "What is your current religious affiliation?" and "What religious affiliation were you raised in." Participants were provided with an extensive list of choices to capture the diversity of religious practices.

Religiosity and Spirituality. Following from work conducted by Taylor et al. (1999); Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging Working Group (1999). *Subjective Religiosity and Subjective Spirituality* was assessed with two standalone items: "How religious are you?" and "How spiritual are you?" These items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all" to 5 = "Very"). In addition, two standalone items were used to assess *Religious Salience and Spiritual Salience*: "How important is religion

in your life today?" and "How important is spirituality in your life today?" These latter items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all important" to 5 = "Very important").

Religious Participation. Two indices of *Non-Organizational Religious Involvement* were drawn from the Private Religious Practices subscale of the Multidimensional Measurement of Religiousness/Spirituality for Use in Health Research (Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging Working Group 1999). Participants responded to the following items: "How often do you pray?" and "How often do you read religious materials, listen to religious TV or radio programs, or listen to religious music?" These items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Never" to 5 = "Almost or Almost/Always"). Finally, *Organizational Religious Involvement* was assessed using two single item indices: "Are you a member of a church, temple, mosque or any religious organization" (1 = "Yes," 0 = "No"), and "How often do you attend religious services?" (1 = "Not at All" to 5 = "Very Often").

Qualitative Analysis

Participants provided written responses to two open-ended questions: "What does 'spirituality' mean to you?" and "What does 'religiosity' mean to you?" Following from the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990), narratives were coded using open-coding techniques. Four trained coders independently read the full text of all narrative data, and identified emergent themes from the narratives. These themes were compiled and integrated into an initial list of coding categories (13 categories related to the meaning of spirituality; 23 categories related to the meaning of religiosity). Thematic categories that demonstrated significant semantic overlap were combined, and rules for determining when responses should be coded into the various categories were clarified. As a result of these efforts, the initial list of themes was reduced to a final list of semantically distinct coding categories (10 categories related to the meaning of spirituality; 12 categories related to the meaning of religiosity). Once this final list of themes was identified, the four coders tested the reliability of the coding scheme. Narrative samples were randomly selected from 10 interviews and were used to establish the reliability of the coding scheme. Consistent with Miles and Huberman (1994) inter-rater reliability was calculated using the formula: Reliability = Agreement/(Agreement + Disagreement), and 85% was set as the minimum acceptable level of reliability. In order to ensure that coders did not develop idiosyncratic patterns of coding over the course of the analysis, inter-rater reliability was checked at several points in the analytic process. In order to control variations in the length of written responses, we coded only for the presence or absence of themes. The overall inter-rater reliability for the coding schemes was 89% for the meaning of spirituality and 91% for the meaning or religiosity.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Of the 498 participants who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, 80.3% (n = 400), identified as gay or lesbian, while 19.7% (n = 98) identified as bisexual. In terms of gender, over 98% identified as either male or female with the remainder identifying as transgender. Approximately 33% identified as Latino or African American. See Table 1 for a more specific description of the sample.

Table 1 Sample demographic characteristics (N = 498)

	N	%
Race/ethnicity		
African American	43	8.6%
Latino/Hispanic (all races)	121	24.3%
White	264	53%
Other	32	6.4%
Missing	38	7.6%
Gender		
Male	259	52%
Female	234	47%
Transgender	5	1%
Sexual Orientation		
Gay male	224	45%
Lesbian	173	34.7%
Bisexual male	35	7.0%
Bisexual female	61	12.2%
Gay or lesbian transgender	3	<1%
Bisexual transgender	2	<1%
Educational attainment		
High school Degree or less	112	22.5%
Some college	136	27.3%
Bachelors	139	27.9%
Graduate degree	111	22.3%
Annual personal income		
Less than $20,000/yr	131	26.3%
$20,000–$39,999	125	25.1%
$40,000–$59,999	118	23.7%
$60,000 or more	113	22.7%
Missing	11	2.2%

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 73 (M = 37, SD = 11.22). The women in our sample were significantly younger than the men (F (2,481) = 14.17, p < .001). Specifically, while the men were on average 39-years-old, the women reported an average age of 34-years-old and the average age of the five transgender individuals was 38 years-old.

Religious Affiliation

The majority of participants, 75.7% (n = 372) were raised as Christian (Catholic or other Christian), approximately 10% were raised as Jewish, and approximately 9% (n = 43) identified as Atheist/Agnostic (see Table 2). The remainder were raised in an Eastern religion (2.4%, n = 12) or failed to provide these data (4.4%, n = 22).

The religion in which the participants were raised varied by three key demographic variables: educational attainment (χ^2 (12) = 23.97, p = .02), race/ethnicity (χ^2 (12) = 102.00, p < .001), and sexual orientation (χ^2 (4) = 17.74, p = .001). In terms of educational attainment, while 25.2% (n = 62) of Catholics had a high-school degree or less, only 16.3% (n = 7) of Agnostics/Atheists, 14.3% (n = 7) of Jews, 16.7% (n = 2) of adherents to Eastern religions, and 18.3% (n = 23) of other Christians were at this educational level. Conversely, while 34.7% (n = 17) of the Jewish participants have earned a graduate degree, only 18.7% (n = 46) of Catholics achieved this educational level. With regard to race/ethnicity, the majority of Latinos (75.2%, n = 85) and the majority of Whites (49.6%, n = 130) were raised as Catholic. The majority of Blacks were raised as "other Christian" (57.5%, n = 23). Of those who were raised in an Eastern religion 54.5% (n = 6) indicated a race/ethnicity other than Black, Latino, or White. Finally, a higher proportion of those raised as Jewish (34.7%, n = 17), or in an Eastern religion (33.3%, n = 4) identified as bisexual than any of the other religious groups, although these cell sizes are relatively small. The religion in which the participants were raised was unrelated to gender or current income.

The majority of respondents identified their current religion as Christian (52.6%, n = 262), 8% identified as

Table 2 Religious affiliations of participants (N = 498)

Religion	Early affiliation	Current affiliation
Atheist/Agnostic	8.6% (n = 43)	26.9% (n = 134)
Jewish	9.8% (n = 49)	8% (n = 40)
Eastern Religion	2.4% (n = 12)	3.8% (n = 19)
Catholic	49.4% (n = 246)	34.3% (n = 171)
Other Christian	25.3% (n = 126)	18.3% (n = 91)
Missing	4.4% (n = 22)	8.6% (n = 43)

Jewish (n = 4), approximately 4% (n = 19) as Eastern religion, and 26.9% (n = 134) as Atheist or Agnostic (See Table 2). The demographic patterns that emerged in relation to current religious affiliation were similar to those that emerged in relation to the religions in which participants were raised. Specifically, current religious affiliation was related to educational attainment (χ^2 (12) = 31.92, p = .001), race/ethnicity (χ^2 (12) = 72.33, p < .001), and sexual orientation (χ^2 (4) = 15.11, p < .01). Although significance was achieved for religious affiliation and age (F (4, 435) = 3.95, p < .01), the findings were not statistically significant as shown in these means for age and Eastern religion (M = 34.71, SD = 8.51), Atheist/Agnostic (M = 35.06, SD = 11.21), Catholic (M = 36.89, SD = 10.45), Jewish (M = 39.51, SD = 12.76), and Other Christian (M = 40,65, SD = 12.11). Tables 3 and 4.

A subset of the participants indicated a different religious affiliation in the present from the one in which they were raised. The smallest change in affiliation was noted among those who were raised as Jewish (n = 47), 80.9% (n = 38) of whom maintained this religious affiliation. Among the other groups, 73.7% (n = 28) of the Atheist/Agnostics maintained this identity in adulthood, 50% (n = 6) of those raised in an Eastern religion retained their religious affiliation, 69.1% (n = 163), and 57.3% (n = 67) of other Christians maintained the religious affiliations in which they were raised.

Religiosity and Spirituality

The mean scores on the indexes of subjective religiosity and subjective spirituality were 2.45 (SD = 1.21) and 3.41 (SD = 1.28), respectively. These scores indicate that participants considered themselves to be significantly more spiritual than religious (t (481) = 16.27, p < .001). A series of repeated measures analyses indicated that this pattern emerged regardless of sexual orientation, gender, or race/ethnicity. However, there was an interactive effect between religiosity, spirituality, and level of educational attainment (F (3,478) = 6.02, p < .001). Specifically, the difference between levels of subjective religiosity and spirituality was greater among those with a graduate degree than the other educational groups. Those with a graduate degree reported higher levels of spirituality than religiosity (M = 3.67 [SD = 1.23] vs. M = 2.33 [SD = 1.23]). This relationship is shown in Fig. 1.

Furthermore, we sought to assess the salience of religion and spirituality in the lives of the participants. Again, participants indicated that spirituality was more important in their lives than religion (t (486) = 15.75, p < .001). Specifically, the mean level of importance assigned by participants to religion was 2.53 (SD = 1.32) and the mean level of importance assigned to spirituality was 3.50

Table 3 Definitions of spirituality ($N = 428$)

Category	Definition	%	(n)
1. Belief in, knowledge of, relationship with a higher power	Spirituality is a belief in a divine, and/or sacred force (e.g., God, Allah), or a personal relationship with God or as religious commitment.	28	138
2. Understanding self, accepting self, being in touch with self	Spirituality refers to efforts to get in touch with their feelings and beliefs; being true to, happy with, or accepting of oneself.	19.2	95
3. Manifesting goodness in the world	Spirituality is the effort to behave in ways that reflect a commitment to demonstrate respect, compassion, kindness.	17	84
4. Interconnectedness between self, others and the universe, nature	Spirituality is an awareness of the unity and interconnectedness of all life and experience.	15.7	78
5. Belief in soul, spirit, transcendent dimension of life, mystical and magical experiences	Spirituality refers to the existence of transcendent forces (e.g., soul, spirits) and to supernatural phenomena.that suggest that life is not limited to the material realm of existence.	10.9	54
6. Meaning, purpose, understanding	Spirituality is a way of understanding the causes of events; knowing one's purpose; guidance; insight; wisdom.	6.1	30
7. Specific practices, contexts or experiences	Spirituality is defined in terms of specific practices (e.g., "meditation," "prayer") or contexts (e.g., "church").	2.0	10
8. Nothing, cannot explain; do not know	Respondent indicates that s/he is unsure of the meaning of spirituality, or that the word has no meaning.	1.8	9
9. Nothing to do with religion	Spirituality defined as distinct for a commitment to organized religion; spirituality is distinct from a belief in God.	1.2	6
10. Coping and resilience	Spirituality aids in peoples' efforts to manage, endure, or transcend adversity.	1	5

Table 4 Definition of religion ($N = 421$)

Category	Definition	%	(n)
1. Organized worship; Specific practices, contexts or experiences	Religion as organized or structured worship; rules based worship; rules and regulations associated with devotion/worship.	31.2	134
2. Belief in, knowledge of, relationship with a higher power; faith	Religion is defined as a belief in or relationship with the existence of a divine, sacred and/or powerful force (e.g., God, Allah).	24.4	104
3. Political, social, economic institution or force; invented institution	Reference to religion as a man-made cultural institution that is concerned with political, social, economic power or wealth.	12.4	53
4. Cognitive control; False beliefs	Religion is a mechanism of manipulation. Religion as mythology; nonsense; illusionary beliefs; calculated lies.	11.5	49
5. Negative outcomes	Religion is an agent of divisiveness, deception, greed, hatred, punitive, war, and harm.	7.2	31
6. Manifesting goodness in the world	Religion is the commitment to behave in ways that are compassionate, forgiving, respectful and loving.	4.2	18
7. Meaning, purpose, understanding; guidance	Religion is a way of understanding the causes of events; knowing one's purpose in life; guidance in how to live; insight; wisdom.	3.7	16
8. Nothing, cannot explain; do not know	Respondent indicates that s/he is unsure of the meaning of religion, or that the word has no meaning.	2.6	11
9. Understanding self, accepting self, being in touch with self	Religion refers to efforts to get in touch with one's feelings and beliefs; being true to self; being happy with or accepting oneself.	1.9	8
10. Interconnectedness between self, others and the universe, nature	Religion refers to an awareness that all life is interconnected.	.7	3
11. Belief in soul, spirit, eternal life; afterlife	Religion refers to the existence of forces (e.g., soul, spirits) that suggest that life is not limited to the material realm of existence.	.4	2

(SD = 1.34). Again, there was no interactive effect of this pattern across race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. However, there was an interaction between the importance placed on religion and spirituality and level of educational attainment (F (3, 483) = 4.67, $p < .01$). Again, there was a greater difference in the importance placed on religion than on spirituality among those with a graduate degree with greater importance placed on spirituality than religion (M = 3.68 [SD = 13.6] vs. M = 2.38 [SD = 1.28]). This relationship is shown in Fig. 2.
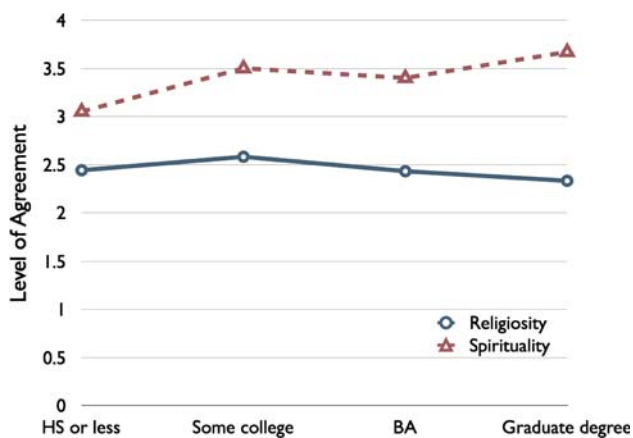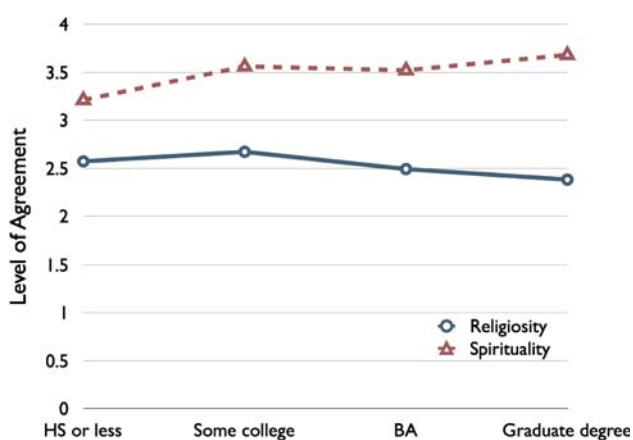
Fig. 1 Levels of religiosity and spirtuality

Fig. 2 Importance of religion and spirtuality

Religious Participation

Only 24.5% (n = 122) reported that they hold a membership in a religious institution such as a church, synagogue, mosque. Membership in religious institutions was unrelated to educational level, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. However, those who indicated membership tended to be slightly older than non-members (t (465) = 2.22, p = .03; M = 39 years-olds, SD = 11.09 vs. M = 37, SD = 11.18). In addition, in relation to their counterparts, members of religious institutions report praying (t (478) = 9.36, p > .001) and attending religious service more frequently (t (476) = 14.57, p < .001), and reading religious materials and watching religious/listen to religious music more frequently (t (477) = 6.06, p < .001).

Multivariate models support these findings but also indicate that current religious affiliation is related to frequency of prayer (F (4, 291) = 5.96, p < .001). However, there are no main or interactive effects on the frequency of prayer by sexual orientation, educational level, or income. Specifically, individuals who are Catholic as well as those

who identify as Other Christian indicate more frequent prayer than those identifying as Jewish or Atheist/Agnostic (both include coefficient values p ≤ .01). Similar patterns emerge in our multivariate model predicting religious service attendance from current religious affiliation (F (4, 241) = 3.15, p = .02), with those identifying as other Christian attending religious services more than all other religious groups (all p ≤ 05). In addition, Catholic, Jewish, and Eastern religion participants attend services more frequently than those identifying as Atheist/Agnostic.

Qualitative Findings

Four-hundred and twenty-eight participants provided responses to the question: "What does spirituality mean to you?" Ten thematic categories emerged from the content analyses of the written responses to this question.

Definitions of Spirituality

Belief in, Knowledge of, or Relationship with a Higher Power

Twenty-eight percent of respondents (n = 120) defined spirituality as a belief in the existence of a divine, sacred and/or powerful force that is external to the individual (e.g., God, Allah), and as one's relationship with such forces. For example, one respondent wrote that spirituality refers to "Having a sense of yourself being connected to a greater power."

Understanding Self, Accepting Self, Being in Touch with Self

Nineteen percent of participants (n = 81) reported that spirituality refers to individuals' efforts to get in touch with their feelings and true beliefs, and the effort to be true to, and accepting of the self. For example, one participant indicated that spirituality refers to the capacity to "Believe in my inner self and listening to that voice within for guidance." Another participant stated that spirituality refers to the "feeling within oneself that defines you as you."

Prosocial Orientation, Positive Emotions and Attitudes

Seventeen percent of participants (n = 73) defined spirituality as one's commitment to prosocial values, attitudes, and behaviors including respect for all life, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, and love. Responses in this category also included references to spirituality as the expression of positive attitudes and emotions (e.g., gratitude). For example, respondents wrote that spirituality means: "being

a good person;" and "a belief in the sanctity of human life and the equality of all humans."

Interconnectedness between Self, Others, Nature, and the Universe

Approximately 16% ($n = 69$) of respondents indicated that spirituality refers to the interconnectedness and unity of all life and experience. In response to the question, "what does spirituality mean to you?" one respondent wrote: "My connections with G-d, nature, other people, and my responsibility to the world."

Belief in Soul, Spirit, Transcendent Dimension of Life

Approximately 11% of respondents ($n = 47$) defined spirituality as a belief in the existence of transcendent forces or energies (e.g., soul, spirits), and in the notion of an afterlife. Further, spirituality was defined as the existence of supernatural or unexplained phenomena. These transcendent forces and supernatural experiences suggest that life is not limited to the material realm of existence. Among the responses that fit into this category were the following: "[Spirituality is a] belief in spirits" and a belief that "[W]e continue to live on beyond death with what we imparted to others."

Meaning, Purpose, and Understanding

Six percent of participants ($n = 26$) defined spirituality as a force that promotes understanding of one's place in the world, the causes of events, and one's purpose in life. In sum, spirituality was envisioned as the root of insight and wisdom. One respondent stated, for example, that spirituality refers to "Being connected to the knowledge that the sum is greater that the parts."

Specific Practices, Contexts or Experiences

Two percent of respondents ($n = 9$) equated spirituality with specific practices or contexts. Responses that fit into this category were typically single word responses including: "meditation," "voodoo," "prayer," and "church."

Nothing; cannot explain; do not know

Approximately 2% ($n = 9$) of respondents indicated that they were unable to define spirituality or that for them the word has no meaning. One respondent wrote: "Don't know. Never thought about it."

Nothing to do with Religion

One percent ($n = 5$) of participants indicated that spirituality is distinct from organized religion or organized worship. Responses in this category indicated that spirituality is distinct from a belief in God and/or does not require a belief in God.

Coping and Resilience

One percent of participants ($n = 5$) defined spirituality as a force that aids in peoples' efforts to manage, endure, or transcend adversity. For example, one person indicated that spirituality is "The idea that there are forces that can aid me in life."

Definitions of Religion

Four-hundred and twenty-one participants provided written definitions of the word religiosity. Twelve themes emerged in relation to the meanings that LGBT individuals ascribed to religiosity.

Organized Way of Practice; Group Worship

Thirty-one percent of participants ($n = 131$) defined religion as organized or structured worship, and as the rules and regulations associated with devotional or worship life. One respondent wrote the following definition of religion: "A community of faithful where my spirituality can grow," another defined religion as "[O]rganized spirituality."

Belief in, Knowledge of, Relationship with a Higher Power

Twenty-four percent of respondents ($n = 101$) defined religion as a belief in the existence of a divine, sacred and/or powerful force that is external to the individual (e.g., God, Allah), and as a personal relationship with God. The following responses offered by participants were included in this category: "Righteously believing in a force greater than you…" and "Your particular way of praising your higher power."

Political, Social, or Economic Institution or Force

Twelve percent of respondents ($n = 51$) defined religion as a "man-made" cultural institution that is concerned principally with political, social, economic power, or wealth. One participant defined religion as "An institution created by man that tries to dictate our lives and ways of living for their own liking and not for those of the individual."

Means of Achieving Cognitive Control

Religion was defined by 12% of respondents (*n* = 49) as a system of false beliefs and as a mechanism for ideological control, manipulation, brain-washing, and propaganda. One respondent described religion as the "Opium of the masses." Other respondents defined religion as "mythology"; "nonsense"; "illusionary beliefs" and "calculated lies."

Negative or Destructive Force

Seven percent of participants (*n* = 29) defined religion as a destructive force. Responses in this category characterized religion as an agent of divisiveness, deception, greed, hatred, punitive, war, and harm. One participant defined religion as "A painful public experience." Another defined religion as "War, death, suffering."

Manifesting Goodness in the World

Four percent of participants (*n* = 17) indicated that religion is the quest to live by a particular moral code and to behave in ways that result in positive outcomes for self or others. These responses suggest that religion inspires a commitment to demonstrate respect for all life, and to behave in ways that are compassionate, kind, forgiving, and loving. One participant stated: "[Religion] helps me see the good in people and in situations." Another defined religion as the commitment to "judge no one."

Meaning, Purpose, Understanding

For approximately 4% of participants (*n* = 16) religion refers to a way of understanding one's place in the world, of discerning the causes of events, and knowing one's purpose in life. From this perspective, religion is related to one's receipt of divine guidance, and one's capacity for insight and wisdom. One participant wrote the following definition of religion: "[religion is] ascribing to a set of rules about how to live;" another wrote: "[Religion is] being able to accept things you cannot change."

Nothing, Cannot Explain; do not know

Approximately 3% of respondents (*n* = 11) indicated that they are unsure of the meaning of religion or indicate that the word "religion" has no meaning.

Understanding Self, Accepting Self, Being in Touch with Self

For 2% of participants (*n* = 8) religion refers to people's efforts to get in touch with their feelings and true beliefs.

Religion was also defined as being true to one's self and being happy with or accepting of oneself. Responses in this category included: "One's beliefs," and "A way to understand yourself."

Interconnectedness between Self, Other, Nature and the Universe

One percent of respondents (*n* = 3) defined religion as an awareness that all life is interconnected, a sense of the unity of all life and all experience, and a sense of wholeness. For example, one participant defined religion as an "Identification with humans."

Belief in Soul, Spirit, Transcendent Dimension of Life

Approximately 1% of participants (*n* = 2) defined religion as the existence of transcendent forces or energies (e.g., soul, spirits) that suggest that life is not limited to the material realm of existence.

Other

Twenty-one of the respondents (5%) were unreadable or unusual and or did not fit into other thematic categories. These responses were categorized as "other." This category included the following response: "Something that I used to do," and "Like going to the bathroom regularly."

Discussion

Religion often has been used to legitimize the ostracism of LGBT individuals. Sacred religious texts have been deployed as authoritative means of verifying that LGBT patterns of attraction and intimacy are sinful (i.e., antithetical to the will of the divine), to make claims about the ends that will inevitably befall LGBT individuals (e.g., divine punishment, damnation), and to monitor and control the behaviors and identities of LGBT men and women. These uses of religion have meant that LGBT individuals often have had to cultivate their religious and spiritual identities in contexts that are hostile, as evidenced particularly by the politically zealous attacks of religious conservatives of the United States. In light of the hostility with which religion often approaches homosexuality, this study endeavored to explore patterns of religious and spiritual identification and practice among an adult sample of LGBT individuals. Further, the study sought to expand existing knowledge about religiosity and spirituality by examining the meanings that LGBT individuals ascribe to religiosity and spirituality.

Our quantitative findings indicate that more than three-fourths of our sample were raised in religious households. The religions in which the participants were raised, and the religious affiliations that they currently hold were related to race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and sexual orientation. Consistent with census data, the majority of Latinos and Whites identified their early and current affiliations as Catholic, and the majority of Blacks identified their early and current affiliations as Protestant (i.e., "other Christian"). The majority of individuals who were raised in, and who currently affiliate with an Eastern religion, identified their race/ethnicity as other than Black, Latino, or White. LGBT individuals who were raised as Catholics and who continue to identify as Catholic reported a lower level of educational attainment (i.e., high school diploma or less) than individuals from other affiliations. Jewish participants were significantly more likely than other groups to report that they have earned a graduate degree.

Although the majority of participants were raised in religious households, only approximately one quarter currently hold a membership in a religious institution (e.g., church, synagogue, or mosque). The low-level of membership may owe to a number of factors including generally lower levels of religious participation among urban-residing adults (Silk 2005). These levels of membership also may reflect, in part, participants' deliberate decision to distance themselves from organized religion (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000). As expected, in relation to non-members, members of religious institutions reported a greater level of participation in public acts of religious commitment (e.g., service attendance), private acts of devotion, including prayer, and consumption of religious media (e.g., reading religious materials, watching religious/listen to religious music).

Consistent with findings from existing research on the sociology of religion, the participants in this study, who are members of religious institutions, tended to be older than non-members (Stolzenberg et al. 1995). Whether this finding reflects a cohort or developmental effect deserves exploration. However, to the extent that these findings reflect a developmental effect, they may suggest that as LGBT individual's age they will have a need for organized communities in which they can express their religious and spiritual needs. These individuals will have a particular need for welcoming and affirming religious communities which can help them to negotiate the challenges and milestones of adulthood (e.g., parenthood, changing family demands, and the health concerns and existential challenges associated with aging). However, the extent to which such affirming communities will be available is unclear. Importantly, in contrast with the findings from existing research involving non-LGBT samples, this study revealed that for LGBT individuals membership in

religious institutions was not related to level of educational attainment, race/ethnicity, or sexual orientation. These findings raise questions about the extent to which social location theories of religious involvement (i.e., theories that link religious and spiritual participation to education, income, and race) are applicable to LGBT communities. Indeed, it is possible that LGBT individuals' decisions to participate in public forms of worship are determined largely by ideology and experience than by demographic factors.

Our findings revealed a link between current religious affiliation and patterns of public as well as private worship. Individuals who identified as "Other Christian" attended religious service more frequently than other religious groups. Catholics and individuals who identified as Other Christian reported more frequent prayer than those identifying as Jewish or Atheist/Agnostic. However, there were no main or interactive effects on the frequency of prayer by sexual orientation, educational level, or income. These differences in patterns of devotional participation may be a function of the particular expectations of each religious tradition. Indeed, unlike Christianity, Judaism and Eastern religions do not necessarily require service attendance, and may encourage devotees to engage in such activities as meditation rather than prayer.

An important part of understanding the landscape of religiosity among LGBT individuals involves mapping changes in their patterns of affiliation. Importantly, a substantial proportion of the participants indicated that their current religious affiliations were different from the affiliations that they held earlier in their lives. Atheists/agnostics and Jewish participants were the least likely to report a change in affiliation. For Jewish participants this finding must be interpreted with caution since Jewish identity names both a religious and a cultural identity. Christians and individuals who were raised in Eastern religions were the most likely to report having changed their religious affiliations. The extent to which these shifts in patterns of affiliation were driven by conflicts related to sexuality, or were the result of ideological or developmental factors (i.e., the result of developmental tendencies to explore new and different traditions) remain unclear.

Patterns or religious affiliation and membership are important, however, Marler and Hadaway (2002) correctly note that expressions of religious commitment must be considered in tandem with indicators of spiritual commitment because individuals cannot generally be characterized as exclusively religious or spiritual. Consistent with the findings of Mattis (2000), Taylor et al. (1999), and Zinnbauer et al. (1997), individuals in this study rated themselves as more spiritual than religious and placed greater importance on spirituality than religion. The mean ratings on the subjective religiosity variable (and reports of service

attendance as well as prayer and religious consumption) clearly indicate that the members of this sample are not irreligious. However, the greater emphasis among the sample on subjective spirituality suggests that spirituality has particular cachet for respondents in this study.

The distinctions that people make between religion and spirituality are as evident in their close-ended ratings of their levels of subjective religiosity and spirituality, as in their written narrative responses to the questions "what does religion mean to you?" and "what does the word spirituality mean for you?" In their definitions of religion participants focused on structured, communal forms of worship (e.g., organized worship), beliefs in and relationship with God (or a system of Gods), as well as on prescribed, rule-based patterns of devotional practice. Many of the definitions of religion that emerged from the narrative analysis also centered on the functional significance of religion in the lives of individuals. On a positive level, consistent with Chamberlain and Zika (1992), Mattis (2002), and Pargament (1997), religion was associated with meaning construction, the development of wisdom, and individuals' commitment to live lives of goodness.

In defining religion, a number of participants also offered critiques of religious institutions and religious adherents. Consistent with findings from research on the sociology and psychology of religion, many participants acknowledged the social integrative functions of religion (Sherkat and Wilson 1995). That is, they acknowledged that religion is an institution that endeavors to shape the beliefs and values of individuals and communities. However, others characterized the work of religion and religious institutions social and economic control over the lives of individuals and as brainwashing or as the imposition of false beliefs on unsuspecting and unwilling others. Some participants also attributed an array of negative societal outcomes (e.g., war, intergroup conflict) to religion. These divergent responses highlight the reality that religion is neither inherently positive nor negative, but that religious ideologies can be put to use to achieve either positive or negative ends. Further, the focus on the negative functions of religion highlights the reality that because of the social position that they occupy, many LGBT individuals are acutely attuned to the ways in which religious institutions, religious ideologies, and religious adherents can foster conflictual and socially disruptive outcomes.

Consistent with Mattis' (2000) and Zinnbauer et al.'s (1997) findings respondents defined spirituality principally as a relational enterprise. More specifically, definitions of spirituality focused on relationship with God/higher power and with self and others. Further, in keeping with conceptualizations proffered by Berdyaev (1939) and Elkins et al. (1988), respondents equated spirituality with a quest to define a moral frame and to live in accordance with the tenets of that moral code, as well as a quest to achieve insight and wisdom. In contrast with the definitions offered to religion, there were no negative associations with definitions of spirituality. This finding suggests that the term "spirituality" may serve as a line of demarcation between formal, institutionalized beliefs and practices that reinforce bias (i.e., religion), and more subjectively meaningful beliefs and practices that affirm LGBT individuals' sense of worth and connectedness to others. A final contribution of this work is its reification of other work that finds that social identities do shape the meanings and practices associated with religiosity. That is, in keeping with other studies that have found that gender, race, and ethnicity inform people's understanding of and engagement in religious practice (see Mattis et al. 2004b), this work suggests that sexual identity also informs the meanings that individuals assign to religiosity and spirituality.

Limitations

This study has important limitations. First, the participants were drawn from a uniquely large and diverse metropolitan center, and from an event (LGBT Pride Festival) that signifies a particular level of openness and comfort with sexual identity. As such, it is important to consider that these findings may not be representative of the experiences and perspectives of men and women who are questioning or who are not out. In addition, the sample was relatively homogenous with regard to ethnicity and religious identification—this precluded within-group comparisons. As such, it is not possible to examine the extent to which definitions of spirituality and religiosity may vary by ethnicity and religious affiliation. Nonetheless, such approaches to data collection with LGBT persons have been used by others with success (Bauer and Welles 2001; Kalichman et al. 2001; Kates and Belk 2001). The self-selected nature of our sample should also be considered. However, the distribution of the sample in terms of key demographic characteristics, including religious affiliation parallels the census data of the city from which participants were recruited. Finally, the data that we have gathered are based on self-report and may be subject to social desirability. However, the distribution of the quantitative data and the diversity of perspectives (i.e., positive and negative reflections on religiosity and spirituality) offered by participants in the qualitative component of the study suggest that social desirability effects may have been minimized.

Conclusions

Despite its limitations, the study makes a number of important contributions. The findings highlight the point that a substantial number of LGBT individuals may remain

committed to religious and spiritual life. For many of these individuals, private, non-organizational devotional practices (e.g., prayer) may be important in maintaining and expressing commitment. The definitions of spirituality offered by respondents serve as a contrast to the limitations and biases of organized religion. To the extent that religious institutions exclude LGBT individuals these institutions may limit their ability to help shape the lives and choices of individuals who, despite their marginal status within their religious communities, continue to be devoted to and influenced by faith. The persistence of faith among LGBT individuals may serve as an important index of the power of religious belief to help people to negotiate the mundane as well as extraordinary challenges of life. Equally important, the sustainability of religious faith and of spirituality among LGBT persons may reflect the creative capacity of marginalized individuals to move beyond the barriers created by humans in the effort to achieve transcendent relationships with human communities and with the divine.

There is a need for longitudinal studies that allow us to explore the ways in which religious and spiritual practices and conceptualizations of the meanings of religiosity, and spirituality develop in tandem with sexual identities among LGBT individuals. Studies of this kind will allow us to assess the particular ways in which the concerns that LGBT individuals face over the course of their development shape their readings of sacred text, their image(s) of God, and their general experience of faith life.

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