Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection   SIT Study Abroad

Fall 2009

Integrating Identities: Negotiating the Religious Lives of Homosexual Christians in the Netherlands

Scott Mitchell
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

Part of the Gender and Sexuality Commons, Religion Commons, and the Sociology of Culture Commons

Integrating Identities: Negotiating the Religious Lives of Homosexual Christians in the Netherlands

Scott Mitchell, *University of Notre Dame*[1]

This paper explores how homosexual Christians experience their religious life, as well as the various methods used to negotiate any difficulties or conflicts between these two identities. Data for this study consists of in-depth interviews with homosexual Dutch adults who participate in worship services at a Catholic congregation in North Holland which ministers specifically to the homosexual community. Findings reveal that respondents describe their religious life as taking place on three different levels: the denominational, the individual, and the community level. These descriptions were characterized by an overall rejection of official denominational doctrine concerning homosexuality, an isolation of religious practice and experience in the personal level, and a strong desire for a welcoming church community. The complexity of the multidimensional nature of religious experience suggests that the existing typologies oversimplify the negotiation of religion and sexuality among homosexual Christians, and that a new analytical tool for examining this process is needed.

Across the globe, the Netherlands is regarded as a tolerant nation, especially in its relations with the LGBT community. While the Netherlands may lead the struggle to create a hospitable environment where LGBT individuals may lead lives free of discrimination, not all pockets of Dutch society are completely hospitable towards homosexual[2] identities. The official doctrines of some religious denominations create an environment that is not always welcoming towards LGBT individuals. In some instances, a denomination will require that an LGBT individual refrain from acting on his or her sexuality, while others deny full membership and participation to individuals who even identify with these sexualities. Debate remains as to whether or not Dutch tolerance extends into the domain of religion. This research seeks a better understanding of how Dutch religious who are also homosexual negotiate these two often-conflicting identities. Specifically, this research examines how homosexual Christians in the Netherlands experience their religious life, as well as the various methods by which they resolve difficulties or conflicts between these identities.

In his research on homosexuality and Islam, Nahas (2005) puts forth a typology of methods for negotiating religious and homosexual identities. The first method involves complete exclusion of all religion in favor of total freedom of sexual expression. In contrast, the second method involves severing contact with the LGBT community, effectively ignoring one's sexuality by taking shelter in religion. The third strategy is to personally reinterpret religious statements on homosexuality in order to incorporate these teachings into one's own lifestyle.

---

[2] In light of Queer Theory, the term *homosexual* can be seen as inaccurate or problematic, as it does not denote the spectrum that the term *queer* implies. When seen within the context of the target population, however, *homosexual* is the most culturally accurate term to use for this analysis. Queer identity does not exist in the Netherlands to the same degree that it does in the United States, especially within the age group and non-academic circles of my study population. I use the term *homosexual* in this analysis because it is how my study population identifies.

Finally, those employing the fourth method leave religious teachings and statements as they are, and also accept themselves the way they are.

A number of other research studies posit their own typologies of strategies to negotiate these two identities, many of which support the typology developed by Nahas (2005). Using survey, questionnaire, or interview research methods, these studies provide empirical support for the "complete exclusion of religion" method (Yip 2000; Mahaffy 1996; Garcia, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez-Valles 2008; Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000), the "severing contact with the gay community" strategy (Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000), the "reinterpret religious statements" method (Yip 1997, 2000; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams 1994; Mahaffy 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000) and the "accept personal sexual self and religious statements as they are" method (Yip 2000; Mahaffy 1996; Garcia, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez-Valles 2008; Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000). These studies offer statistics representing the relative prevalence of each of these strategies, as well as theories on why some strategies were more prevalent than others. Factors that were observed to influence strategy selection included religiosity, (Hellman, Green, Gray, & Williams 1981) perception of the church as irrelevant, (Yip 2000) and quality of relationship with the Christian community (Mahaffy 1996).

Some of the aforementioned research highlights additional methods not accounted for in Nahas' typology (2005). One additional method, identified by Yip (2000), includes the rejection of institutional religion in an effort to preserve one's personal faith, spirituality, and Christian identity. This method involves a rejection of an official institution that does not meet the individual's needs, and refocuses faith based on the individual and personal experience, rather than the practice of religion within an organized institution. In subsequent research, Yip (2002) analyzes data from a national survey of 565 respondents, and finds evidence that the strategy of

refocusing faith based on the individual may indeed be an emerging trend among homosexual Christians.

In their research, Garcia, Gray-Stanley, and Ramirez-Valles (2008) identify another important strategy used to reduce dissonance. In their interviews, researchers found that after attempting to reconcile their sexuality with their religion, their respondents often chose to join a different religious denomination that was more accepting of alternative sexualities, and even joined non-traditional religious denominations.

The body of literature surrounding the negotiation of an individual's religion and sexual identity provides a wealth of strategies to negotiate these two identities. The current knowledge of the topic, however, relies heavily on survey and questionnaire data. This research makes a unique contribution to the current body of literature by collecting data through in-depth interviews. By analyzing interview data, this research can capture nuances of respondents' thoughts and feelings that are essential to the discussion of this topic. Also, placing this study in the highly tolerant and progressive Netherlands provides an examination of whether or not this tolerance extends into the domain of religion. Lastly, this research adds an international dimension to a body of literature that is largely focused on American Christians.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study consists of in-depth interviews with eight individual homosexual Dutch adults who participate in worship services at a Catholic congregation in North Holland that ministers specifically to the homosexual community, referred to henceforth by the pseudonym "Pride Nederland," or "Pride." Participants were recruited by contacting the Pride administration via email, which then announced the project to the congregation as a whole

4

during a worship service and petitioned participants on the researcher's behalf. Participants were recruited and scheduled for later interviews at this worship service. This analysis also makes use of participant observation data from one Pride worship service.

Interviews were conducted at respondents' private residences or at the SIT World Learning office. Interviews lasted between 40 to 90 minutes in length; questions focused on the respondent's history of church involvement, "coming out," conflicts or difficulties regarding their religion and sexuality, and conceptions of religious and sexual identities. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

Although Pride is a Catholic Congregation, many respondents reported Protestant backgrounds. The sample was 87.5 percent male and 12.5 percent female, a distribution that is representative of the Pride congregation as a whole. The estimated mean age of the sample is 50 years, which is also representative. This research does not suggest, however, that the Pride congregation is representative of homosexual Christians as a whole.

The in-person interview format aims to capture nuances of respondents' thoughts and feelings that are essential to understanding how they negotiate their religious and sexual identities. In an effort to understand how individuals negotiate conflicting identities, the interview format allows in-depth exploration of facets of the topic that are not accessible with quantitative analysis. Given the sample size and nonrandom recruitment method, the generalizability of this study is limited. The responses given by participants cannot be taken as representative of any larger group; rather, these stories should be seen as personal, lived experiences of individual LGBT Christians.

ANALYSIS

The following findings constitute an exploratory look into how homosexual Christians separate and experience their religion at the denominational, personal, and community level, as well as how this separation is used to integrate one's religion and sexuality.

The Denominational Level

The first dimension of experienced religion to be discussed here is religion at the denominational level. Respondents' experience of the denominational level includes their knowledge of and contact with official church doctrine and statements issued by its leaders. Distinct from the experience of religion within the community of a particular parish or congregation, experience of the denominational label pertains to membership in a specific religious category. While this interaction remains largely intangible, it can have a very concrete and profound effect on the faith lives of individuals. This can be seen in the ways in which respondents describe their religious denominations. A vast majority of respondents described their religious denominations as discouraging, alienating, or unwelcoming. Conversations about religious denominations included descriptions of how homonegative doctrine is driving parishioners away from organized religion, and how many have chosen to forsake institutionalized religion to preserve their personal faith.

Official Church Doctrine as Discouraging, Alienating, or Unwelcoming. Respondents who discussed the religious denominations they have been a part of were likely to describe these official churches as having a negative effect on their faith lives. As one man explains, "the Roman Catholic Church, they've always been punishing, saying, 'Oh, you can't do that; that is impossible.'" In this quote, the parishioner makes clear the restrictive role that the Roman

Catholic Church plays in his religious life. He later continues, describing the Church's opposition to his marriage:

> Sometimes you hear it anonymously from someone in a high position in the Roman Catholic Church, who says, "This shouldn't happen, this shouldn't be done." We're still confronted that way. The priest that we had last Sunday said that he cannot allow himself to put his name on all the things we do and he cannot allow us to present it to everybody.

Here, the Church is depicted as a force that hinders the respondent's activity within the Church, and punishes Church leaders who minister to the homosexual community. This man is not alone in his sentiments; every respondent interviewed voiced their disagreement or dissatisfaction with official Church statements on homosexuality at least once during their interview. Another man shares,

> In the Pentecostal church [homosexuality] is a great sin. Not only do they say that you cannot practice, but even to be homosexual is not allowed. Because they say that you are not born that way, and so you can be healed of it. I felt that I was not understood.

In describing the official stance of his church regarding his sexuality, this respondent reveals the denomination's rejection of him and its desire that he change his sexuality. Despite being intangible church dogma, the Pentecostal church's words affected the respondent's faith life. He states, "Actually I believed what they said about homosexuality. I think I had more of a fight with myself than with the church." This individual's interactions with the denominational dimension of religion caused him severe guilt, and he later shared that his involvement in church has had an overall negative impact on his life.

Opposition to Official Church Statements. Individuals who took the negative statements of their denomination to heart proved to be the exception because the majority of respondents interviewed reported that they never believed these official statements to be true. These individuals, by rejecting their denomination's condemnations of their sexual practices, maintain their own faith lives and self-esteem. The following interview provides an example.

> I: How did the conflict between your religion and your sexuality make you feel?
> R: Well, for my own feelings there's never been a conflict. I've accepted [myself] from the beginning. I know that this is the way I should live, and live it up to the best, and fulfil it.
> I: So even though the church has told you it's not ok to be homosexual, you've never believed that yourself.
> R: Yep, exactly.

Here, self-acceptance lies diametrically opposed to the acceptance of church doctrine. Another interview echoes these feelings, saying, "I still feel that most parts of the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church hold for me. But here I can feel in myself that the Church cannot be right in this respect, because I didn't make the choice of being gay."

Others described more pronounced clashes between sexuality and denominational edicts; the following interview chronicles a conflict whereby the respondent sends a condescending priest out of his home,

> [The Priest] said, "You've been a big sinner all your life." He was very annoyed, and it got that far that I said, "Now you're out, I don't want you anymore. You get out of the door." He said, "You're a big sinner, and God won't forgive you." I said, "You better get out because I don't want to talk to you anymore. If I've been a sinner all my life, I don't feel that way. I don't understand it." Immediately I don't want to go to the church again. Never.

Citing personal experience, these respondents justify their rejection of official church statements. Often, this rejection of the denomination's teachings on homosexuality were coupled with a rejection of the denomination altogether.

Driving Away Parishioners. When discussing religious denominations and the statements on homosexuality that they endorse, respondents often reported that churches suffered diminishing numbers as a result of their views. One woman says, "They lose a lot of gay people, they turn their backs to the church because of this teaching." She continues, substantiating this claim by citing her own experience:

I also like the Catholic liturgy when it is open minded, and it is too bad that it is sort of changing back again. There was a lot of space, and then Rome got stricter and that means that more Catholics are leaving the churches than before. John the 23rd was more popular here. The celibate rule, it is not possible of course. It is not human to be so strict. And no women and no gays; it is too bad because there are beautiful churches and it is a beautiful religion but they make too many restrictions; that's sad.

One man, with knowledge of the Roman Catholic Church's stance, avoided membership completely, stating, "I was sure that I wouldn't be welcomed in the Roman Catholic Church at all as far as I understood the Roman Catholic Church." Another followed similarly, reasoning, "The Pentecostal church is very strict, extreme. And I didn't like that anymore." These reports indicate a possible consequence of many denominations' unwelcoming stance towards homosexuality. Given that all participants were also unanimous in their rejection of their denominations' official teaching on homosexuality, it is reasonable to assume that severance from the professed denomination often accompanies this sentiment. While this may entail accepting one's sexuality as it is and continuing participation in one's local congregation (Nahas 2005), this solution is not always sufficient.

Leaving the Church to Preserve One's Faith. Given the finding that the negative messages at the denominational level are a negative force in the lives of many homosexual people, it is not surprising that many respondents mentioned leaving their church in order to maintain their religious faith. The following respondent describes the Roman Catholic Church as an impediment to his relationship with God:

R: It's a rule and someone made the rule, and between me and God or me and Mary there's always the structure of the Roman Catholic Church.
I: So the Catholic Church almost comes in between your relationship with God?
R: Yes. It not always very helpful, I must say.

This respondent describes his religious faith as dependent on the separation of God from the Roman Catholic Church. Another respondent agrees,

> I see church and God as two different things. The church tries to do everything that God wants, but still there is not one church in this world that is completely right. And that's why I see it as two different things, God and the church.

By framing a perfect God in the background of an imperfect institution, this respondent separates the beneficial from the oppressive in order to maintain his religious faith. A third man feels similarly, keeping only the aspects of religion that are positive for him, stating: "We always hated the prescriptions and the laws of the church. We say that the church is a church of love. For us, the most important thing is the love of Christ and the Gospels." These uniform, abundant descriptions of the separation of church from religious faith, coupled with reports of dwindling numbers of church congregations suggest a shift away from the institutionalized practice of religion among homosexual people towards an expression of belief that is experienced on an individual basis.

The Individual Level

The data suggest that those who maintain their religious faith in spite of the negativity experienced at the denominational level respond to this negativity by segregating their experience of religion to the individual level. This involves choosing to practice religion unaffiliated with a denomination, solely on an individual basis. One man's description of his mother's words illustrates this well:

> My mother, she said, "the only thing is that my son is happy and the church can't touch him because his religion is inside, and whether he can go to church or whether he is forbidden, I think that that is not important. His belief in God is more important than if a pastor says that he has to change himself."

This focus on religion as a personal journey often includes increased emphasis on personal experience of and relationship with God.

When asked, a vast majority of respondents reported that their religious journey was something that they did on a personal basis, rather than with a church (Appendix A). One respondent simply stated, "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian." Another supplies his rationale for this choice: "The moment I understood for myself that I wanted to live a homosexual life, I put the church on the side because I didn't feel that I fit in." Citing a lack of support, many respondents professed a preference to experience religion at the individual level.

The Individual Practice of Religion. In place of practicing their religious faith in the context of an unwelcoming or alienating denomination, many respondents described the methods by they which they maintained their religiosity while distancing themselves from their discriminating denominational affiliation. One man shares his solution:

> I: So how did you end up resolving these conflicts with the church?
> R: We found our own way to do it, lighting candles, having small prayers at home, going on holiday and going to churches to pray, light candles over there, going to masses, having things together, sometimes with friends, but not really involved in church in the community of church.

This solution of practicing religion on a personal level was emphasized by a vast majority of respondents, and effectively allows homosexual people to practice their religious faith free from the dissonance imposed by an unwelcoming religious denomination. Another respondent introduces prayer as the core of his religious life, saying, "I don't think it (weekly church attendance) is important. I pray everyday. That is what I do. I never forget to do that, if it is short or long, but that is what I always do." Later, in a discussion of whether or not his involvement in the church caused him guilt or shame, he described the role of prayer:

> I: So how did that keep you from feeling guilty?
> R: That is because of prayer. In a prayer you feel that God is there, or, with me especially, I am a Maria fan. With the presence and with my prayer I never felt that I had sinned. I always feel the presence and the help of them in everything I do.

By emphasizing the individual practice of religion, these respondents free themselves from the negative gaze of religious denominations in an effort to balance Christianity and homosexuality.

Emphasize Personal Relationship with God. As one dimension of experiencing religion on a personal level, a number of respondents emphasized that a personal relationship with God was central to their religious faith and successful reconciliation of their sexuality with their religion. The following interview depicts one man's struggle:

> I: So did you ever resolve those conflicts inside yourself?
> R: Yeah, but not until a few years ago.
> I: Ok, how did that happen?
> R: I was growing in it. I was looking around at what other Christians say about it, and I read about it, and I came to another conclusion.
> I: What was that conclusion?
> R: That God loved me the way I am.

By looking at himself through the eyes of a loving God rather than from the gaze of a church that had rejected him, this man reached reconciliation between his sexuality and religious life. Another respondent recognizes the plurality of ways that individuals experience, feel, or know, God, "*Godsbeeld*," in Dutch:

> I: Would you say that your religious journey is something that you do with the church? Or is it more of a personal journey for you?
> R: More personal I think. I think the community is important for the community, but in our church the *Godsbeeld,* how you experience God, how you feel God, how you see God, is very, very diverse. I work for this bulletin and I interview church members, and I ask them how do they feel God, and it is completely different for each person, in nature, in your heart, in the community, in people.

This variety of ways to experience God affords believers a variety of ways to worship, each one unique to the individual. Thus, one's unique *Godsbeeld* transforms faith life into a very private matter.

Homosexual Christian Identity. Across nearly all of the interviews, responses were marked by a current lack of conflict or dissonance between respondents' religion and their

sexuality. This could be attributed to the proper formation of a homosexual Christian identity

that all but one respondent professed to possess (Appendix A). This reconciliation between

religious and sexual life is characterized by a way of life that allows an individual to be both

Christian and homosexual at the same time. The following interview provides an example:

> I: Would you say that you have developed a gay Catholic identity? In other words, have
> you found a way of being both gay and Catholic?
> R: Yeah, I'm sure I did.
> I: What does that look like?
> R: The combination of being helpful in your own neighbourhood, going to Lourdes,
> volunteering, showing a Christian way of living, being helpful, showing that you care,
> putting effort into things you don't believe in on the first hand, seeing when someone
> needs something and what can I do about it. And that always in combination with saying
> this is my lifestyle, this is my husband, these are my friends, and I'm enjoying life in this
> or that way.

The presence of this identity was very evident in respondents' speech, as well as in the

unanimous assertion by respondents that they felt positively and accepting towards their own

sexuality (Appendix A). In addition, the vast majority of respondents denied that their religious

background ever caused them to feel guilt or shame (Appendix A). It would be logical to assume

that this identity empowered these individuals to turn away from unwelcoming institutions and

turn the focus of their religious experience inward. Despite the emphasis on religion as a private

matter and personal practice, the value of experiencing religion within a community was not

overlooked or ignored by respondents.

The Community Level

Nearly all respondents mentioned, at least once in their interview, a desire, need, or

appreciation for a welcoming and like-minded community with whom they could practice their

religion. The vast majority of respondents had lengthy and diverse histories of church

involvement, with experience in a variety of churches from different backgrounds. While many

of these individual congregations met respondents with only tolerance or even rejection, participants offer a number of accounts of congregations where they were fully welcomed. Ultimately, an extremely high value is placed on congregations where the parishioner can feel accepted, welcomed, and at home; these congregations are usually encountered after a rigorous search, a "congregation search" that respondents also describe in full detail.

The Need for a Community Component. Although many respondents proved to themselves that they were fully capable of confining their religious experience to a personal level only, many also expressed a need or desire for their religious life to also have a community aspect. They describe this aspiration with uniformity:

> I can pray on my own, but sometimes I like to be with people who also believe in a God. I felt very unhappy because I want to be a Christian and I feel I must go, and there was something missing by not going to church.

> You do it together with your community. Of course it is also a personal way, but then it will be only a lonely way. You need your community because you need people around you to fulfill your life.

> I think you need the church to be part of a Christian community, I don't think you can be Christian just by yourself. So for me church is important. It is also to celebrate the service with each other.

These excerpts portray faith life as rooted in the personal level, but highlight the point that in order to fully flourish, one's experience of religion must branch out into a community of people.

Rejected, Tolerated, or Welcomed. Despite the desire for a community component within their experience of religion, finding a community in which to actualize this goal often proved to be difficult. In recounting their histories of church involvement, respondents related accounts from a number of congregations in which they did not feel welcomed. The following interview illustrates this well:

> I: Were the other church members supportive? Or the church leaders?
> R: No, they were doing everything to keep me away from the gay lifestyle.

14

> I: Church leaders, even other church members, they weren't accepting?
> R: No.
> I: And how about now in the Evangelical church? Would you say that the other church members there are supportive, or not really?
> R: Most of them will support me as long as I choose for a celibate life. They don't support me in that.

Here, once the respondent's sexuality was made known, his status in these congregations hinged on him leading a celibate life. One woman describes a similar dilemma in a different congregation:

> R: One of the Protestant churches we belonged to that is more right wing, more reformed, there you couldn't participate in the communion.
> I: So you've been to the more right wing churches and you don't feel very welcome there?
> R: No, it wouldn't be possible to participate actively. It would be possible to with the "no show, no tell" like in the army in the United States, that would be possible. But if you are well known and they know you live together then it would not be very much appreciated.

While not explicitly refusing their homosexual parishioners, other congregations adopted instead a tolerant stance:

> I: And have you felt welcomed in all of the churches that you've been a part of?
> R: No, not at all. If it wasn't organized by us, if we weren't part of the team, I didn't feel welcome, only tolerated.

In this case, the respondent was not openly rejected, but the mere allowance of participation that he was afforded could not substitute for the welcoming congregation that he was searching for.

Respondents did not describe their experience as entirely negative however, and many reported that there were accepting and welcoming congregations interspersed among the unwelcoming ones. One woman describes a congregation she found, saying, "This church was always busy with gay people. In that way it was pretty modern, progressive, and liberal. Of course, not all of the churches are." A second respondent found one of these congregations, who, in spite of its denominational affiliations, married the respondent and his partner within the Roman Catholic Church. He states:

> Our priest did, not all priests do, and you have to look for the right priest. And typically Catholic, you cannot ask the Bishop for permission because then they will think about it for a year or they won't give you permission, you just tell the Bishop, "I'm going to marry him, with that priest who is going to bless my marriage, and he's even going to take care of the body and soul of Jesus to be present at that marriage."

When asked for their thoughts regarding the church's attitude toward their sexuality, the vast majority of respondents replied that it depends purely on the community in question. This finding implies that while homosexual believers are being met with resistance in many congregations, a number of communities are fully welcoming these parishioners. To add the much needed community component to these parishioners' faith lives, they need only to search until one of these congregations is found.

The Congregation Search. As respondents detailed their histories of church involvement, they consistently and uniformly described the process of searching for a church community. A dominant theme across these descriptions was the notion that the congregation must minister fully to the parishioner, or the parishioner will move on to a different church, unwilling to be part of a community that isn't fully welcoming. One woman describes this increased freedom in searching for a church community as a product of a liberal shift in church congregations. She reports, "I think now it is much easier to be gay in many churches. And if, not then you can go to another church were it is accepted. I think that's a big change from 20 years ago." The manner in which respondents describe their search for a congregation communicates the power and freedom they wield in their choice, saying, "You could go to whatever church you want. If you don't feel at home at one church than you can just to go another," or "[The church] has to fit what you believe. If they say things I don't agree with, then I'll move on to another church." Thus, in the process of searching for a church community, it is up to the congregation to fit the

parishioner, not vice-versa. Another respondent describes his vigorous pursuit of the acceptance and welcome that he demands before he invests any effort in a church community:

> You tell me exactly what you think about [homosexuality] and not "if you put it this way or you put it that way," no. I want to hear exactly from your mouth that I am welcome. I never hide it. The moment they meet me I'll let them know within one minute if possible that I'm married to a man and that we're living together already for 30 years. I'll do it on purpose, because I don't want a conflict in five years. I want to hear it immediately, otherwise I won't start; I won't put energy in it.

Due to the existence of congregations that are welcoming to homosexual people, homosexual believers are freed from participation in an unwelcoming congregation. To add a community dimension to their faith lives, parishioners may instead find a congregation that ministers to them, rather than face the dissonance that comes from participation in a community that disapproves of their sexual identity.

The Value of Feeling Welcome. Against a backdrop of intolerance, a consistent theme across interviews was the high level of importance placed on the specific community where a homosexual parishioner could feel at home, welcomed, and accepted. Often times, this congregation took the form of Pride, a congregation that ministers specifically to the homosexual community from which the participants were sampled. The language that respondents used to speak about their congregation suggested that this community is vitally important to their faith life.

> I look forward to going to Pride. Because I feel that there is sort of a warmth coming to you. There you are accepted for what you are. When we were standing there together and praying, holding hands in a circle, then you feel that you are one of the community. You feel you are believing in a God and you feel one of the people. You feel happy. You feel at home.

> In '97 I met my partner and that was the first time I went to Pride services. That was the first time I said, "Okay, yes, there are people within the church where I can feel at home."

> That gives me happiness. Whenever I enter that building, as simple as it may be. Everybody is accepted here. And then you feel you've won.

> That feels good, just to be with other people who are, to a certain extent, like-minded, and
> empty your head and give your thoughts to something else other than yourself. In a way
> that's what church is about, it's about meeting people and having a sense of belonging.

In another conversation concerning the positives and negatives of church involvement, one man

offers his praise and appreciation for the church community while drawing a clear line between

the denominational level and the community level of religious experience:

> I: So what part of your involvement in church has had a positive effect, and what part has
> had that negative effect?
> R: The negative effect is the institute, the church as an institute, and the positive effect is
> undoubtedly the community. The community inspires me.

The extent to which Pride parishioners value a welcoming congregation is also evident within the

worship service itself. This is most noticeable during the Lord's Prayer, during which the entire

congregation leaves their seats to form a circle around the perimeter of the room and join hands.

This prayer is accompanied by the Sign of Peace, whereby each parishioner shakes hands with,

or otherwise embraces those in close proximity. This particular Sign of Peace proved to be very

lengthy, as parishioners left their seats and made the extra effort to embrace many friends who

were not seated near to them. These outward signs of community and welcome suggest that this

space is extremely important to these individuals' experience of their religion.

Although Pride services seem to be an enormous source of strength for its parishioners, a

significant minority of respondents cautioned against retreating completely into this safe church

community. They maintained that rather than comprise the entire community dimension of

religious experience, Pride should instead be a source of strength for the parishioner, who should

then allow his or her faith journey to branch out into less accepting communities. One man

explains,

> The reason I go to Pride is because of the community that is there. To help the other
> people who come there and to feel a sort of union with the people there so you can go

back to your parish and be strong there. So it should not be the only place where you go to church. And that's what we tell the people who come there. "Please, next week, go to your parish, live your life, be an example, and be open."

This parishioner sees Pride not as an end or a solution, but one means of strengthening homosexual believers in the community dimension of their faith lives. A second man agrees, referring to Pride as the "backbone" of his religious life,

We visited other churches but only with the backbone that we give ourselves from Pride, from the social life, the friends, from the talking with one another, with a Catholic background of course. And by seeing others with backbone you can go elsewhere and show enthusiasm or interest and also keep your dignity at the same time.

He later continues, seeing Pride as a calling to further action rather than an end to revel in:

Even at Pride, you can say "it's no good that you do that, you have to present yourself, you should fight all your life for Catholics who are gay to fit in the social life so they don't have to isolate or lock the door or need just gays to have a thing like that." But it shows that you need things like that to get a good firm backbone to present yourself.

Here, these respondents feel called beyond Pride's accepting sanctuary, and into the larger religious community to live their faith life.

The Future of Pride

Based on the findings described above, it is reasonable to assume that Pride is a positive force in the faith lives of many homosexual people. What is the future of this welcoming community? One visit to a Pride worship service reveals a high median age of those in attendance, with no youth present. Respondents confirmed that the absence of youth was indeed typical of Pride worship services, and speculated about the congregation's survival. When asked to conjecture as to why there were no young people at Pride services, many respondents cited widespread secularization, noting that there were few young people at any worship service. One man reasons, "I think it is the same reason that there are not any young people at other churches.

It's exactly the same. At our parish I don't see any young people." When asked, the vast majority

of respondents answered this way, noting that the rising age of religious congregations was not

specific to Pride alone.

Respondents supplied a number of reasons for decreased church attendance among youth.

One man, recalling the traditional nature of many church services, said, "They think it is a little

bit boring." Other respondents postulated:

> Religion is not very appealing nowadays to youth. And if it is, it is probably less formal
> and more individualistic because everything in life has become more individualistic.
> Hence younger people are not tempted to go to church because it is such a set thing.

> Young people hardly need church. I think they do but it's a decision that they have to
> make themselves. I have a background in being in Catholic services every morning, but
> they don't have that anymore, so they miss that part of church in their life.

These quotes suggest that rather than discarding all experience of religion, young people of today

may have only disregarded the community dimension of religious experience, and may continue

to experience their religion on a personal level. One respondent suggested that youth would find

a need or desire for the community dimension later in their life:

> I: So LGBT young people, they are living out their faith in their own way, just not with
> the church?
> R: Yeah.
> I: So they believe in God and they are religious, just not within Pride or another church?
> R: Yeah. The examples I have in my mind, when I tell them that I live my life as a gay in
> combination with Catholic belief, I see that there is a sense in them that says "hmm,
> sounds interesting, I might do something with that in future." But I think they'll wait until
> the problem shows up or they meet someone.

Thus, it is possible that the need for a community dimension is delayed in youth until later in life,

triggered in adulthood by a desire for deeper religious experience.

CONCLUSION

This investigation explored how homosexual Christians who are involved with Pride experience their faith lives, as well as how they negotiate conflicts between their religion and sexuality. In-depth interviews revealed that these parishioners experience their religious faith with strict lines drawn between denominational, personal, and community levels of religious experience.

It is through this multidimensional separation that this group successfully negotiates the difficulties and conflicts associated with being Christian and homosexual. By segregating and isolating the denominational level of religion, homosexual Christians can effectively minimize this aspect of religion in their lives, an unwelcoming, discouraging, or otherwise negative aspect of their faith. This group may then find solace by experiencing religion on a purely personal level. By keeping the personal practice of religion separate from negative denominational edicts, homosexual Christians can disregard these harmful messages. While this group suggested that they were fully capable of living their religious life as a personal journey, they also revealed a definite need, desire, and appreciation for a community in which they could feel accepted, welcome, and at home. An increase in the number of these welcoming communities empowers homosexual Christians to leave congregations in which they do not feel welcome, and oblige parishes to minister to them, rather than feeling pressure to conform to the church congregation itself. Respondents conveyed the extreme importance of these welcoming congregations in their faith lives, congregations which some choose to use only as a "backbone," a source of strength that allows them to venture out into less welcoming communities.

This research effectively explores the extent to which Dutch tolerance is experienced in religious domains, and expands the current body of literature by giving an international

dimension to the exploration of how homosexual Christians negotiate their religion and their sexuality. It should be noted that while the observed multidimensional separation of religion does not fit neatly into the existing negotiation method typologies, elements of this process are reminiscent of existing types. The strategy of "accepting one's personal sexual self and religious statements as they are" (Yip 2000; Mahaffy 1996; Garcia, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez-Valles 2008; Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000; Nahas 2005) resembles the process of turning away from negative denominational stances on homosexuality and focusing on the personal practice of religion. This study also directly supports research by Yip, (2000, 2002) who proposes a strategy that involves the rejection of an official institution that does not meet the individual's needs, and refocuses faith based on the individual and personal experience. His research posits this strategy as a growing trend among homosexual Christians, and this research supports his conclusion. Lastly, this research provides partial support for research conducted by Garcia, Gray-Stanley, and Ramirez-Valles (2008), where the act of changing religious denominations to one that is more accepting was proposed as a negotiation method. Rather than change religious *denominations*, the respondents in the present research chose to change religious *communities* in search of tolerance and welcome.

Although these findings may resemble existing typologies, the finding of religious experience as multidimensional demonstrates the necessity of a new analytical tool for examining the negotiation of religion and sexuality among homosexual Christians. This research shows that the use of typologies to describe their experiences is an oversimplification of these phenomena, and that survey data alone cannot accurately capture the complexity of the negotiation process. These respondents' reality of their religious-sexual negotiation as multidimensional mandates that future typologies examine this negotiation process on a

multidimensional level, assessing the thoughts, feelings, and actions at the denominational, personal, and community levels.

This research does not claim that this strategy of multidimensional separation of religion is characteristic of all homosexual European Christians. The demographic similarities among the sample may explain the similarities among responses, which should not be taken as representative. Instead, the presence of these separate dimensions of religious experience should provide a new lens through which to view future and existing typologies of strategies for negotiating religion and homosexuality.

Limitations of this research include sample size, under-representation of both women and youth, and demographic similarity of the respondents. Future research should incorporate a wider sample from a number of different congregations, including congregations not ministering specifically to the homosexual community. Further research should also capture the thoughts and feelings of homosexual religious youth on the topic, an area that has gone relatively unstudied, especially in Europe. Lastly, future research should make an effort to capture the thoughts and feelings of homosexual religious women on the topic. Given that the Pride congregation is overwhelmingly male, more attention should be given to homosexual women's religious experience, as well as to why this disparity exists.

REFERENCES

Garcia, D.I., Gray-Stanley, J., and Ramirez-Valles, J. 2008. "The Priest Obviously Doesn't Know That I'm Gay: The Religious and Spiritual Journeys of Latino Gay Men." *Journal of Homosexuality* 45:411-436.

Hellman, R.E., Green, R., Gray, J.L., and Williams, K. 1981. "Childhood Sexual Identity, Childhood Religiosity, and 'Homophobia' as influences in the Development of Transsexualism, Homosexuality, and Heterosexuality." *Archive of General Psychiatry* 38:910-915.

Mahaffy, K.A. 1996. "Cognitive Dissonance and Its Resolution: A Study of Lesbian Christians." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35:392-402

Nahas, O. 2005. *Homo en Moslim, Hoe Gaat dat Samen?: 1001 Vragen Over Islam en Homosexualiteit.* Utrecht: FORUM, Instituut voor Multiculturele Ontwikkeling, Nederland.

O'Brian, T. 1991. "A Survey of Gay/Lesbian Catholics Concerning Attitudes Toward Sexual Orientation and Religious Beliefs." *Journal of Homosexuality* 21:29-44.

Rodriguez, E.M., and Ouellette, S.C. 2000. "Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive church." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39:333-347.

Wagner, G., Serafini, J., Rabkin, J., Remien, R., and Williams, J. 1994. "Integration of One's Religion and Homosexuality: A Weapon Against Internalized Homophobia?" *Journal of Homosexuality* 26:91-110.

Yip, A. 1997. "Attacking the Attacker: Gay Christians Talk Back." *British Journal of Sociology* 48:113-127.

Yip, A. 1997. "Dare to Differ: Gay and Lesbian Catholics' Assessment of Official Catholic Positions on Sexuality." *Sociology of Religion* 58:165-180.

Yip, A. 2000. "Leaving the Church to Keep my Faith: The Lived Experiences of Non-heterosexual Christians", in L. J. Francis and Y. J. Katz (eds) *Joining and Leaving Religion: Research Perspectives*. pp. 129–145. Leominster: Gracewing.

Yip, A. 2002. "The Persistence of Faith Among Non-heterosexual Christians: Evidence for the Neo-secularization Thesis of Religious Transformation." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41:199-212.

Yip, A. 2005. "Queering Religious Texts: An Exploration of British Non-heterosexual Christians' and Muslims' Strategy of Constructing Sexuality-Affirming Hermeneutics." *Sociology* 39:47-65.

APPENDIX A

Selected Interview Guide Items Tabulated (n=8)

3. Do you currently attend Catholic/Christian services? How often do you attend?
> Monthly (37.5%)
> Nearly weekly (50%)
> Weekly+ (12.5%)

7. How would you describe yourself in terms of religion or spirituality? Are you very religious/devout, somewhat religious/devout, or not really religious/devout at all?
> Not very religious (0%)
> Somewhat religious (50%)
> Very religious (50%)

11. Has your religious background ever made you feel guilt or shame about your sexuality?
> Yes (25%)
> No (75%)

13. Overall, do you think that your involvement in church has a positive or a negative effect on your life?
> Positive (75%)
> Negative (12.5%)
> Equal (12.5%)

15. How did your parents react to your coming out? Were the very supportive?
> Yes (75%)
> No (25%)

19. Would you say that your religious journey is something you do with the church or is it more of a personal journey for you?
> Personal journey (75%)
> With the church (12.5%)
> Both equally (12.5%)

20. How would you describe your attitude towards your own sexuality?
> Accepting (100%)
> Tolerant (0%)
> Negative (0%)

22. Would you say that you have developed a gay Catholic/Christian identity? In other words, have you found a way of being both L/G/B/T and Catholic/Christian? What does that look like?
> Yes (87.5%)
> No (12.5%)

World Learning
SIT Study Abroad

Consent to Use of Independent Study Project (ISP)

(To be included with the electronic version of the paper and in the file of any World Learning/SIT Study Abroad archive.)

Student Name: **Scott Mitchell**

Title **Integrating Identities: Negotiating the Religious Lives of Homosexual Christians in the Netherlands**

Program and Term Netherlands. International perspectives on sexuality & gender. Fall 2009

1.   When you submit your ISP to your Academic Director World Learning/SIT Study Abroad would like to include and archive it in the permanent library collection at the SIT Study Abroad program office in the country where you studied and/or at any World Learning office Please indicate below whether you grant us the permission to do so

2.   In some cases, individuals. organizations, or libraries in the host country may request a copy of the ISP for inclusion in their own national. regional, or local collections for enrichment and use of host country nationals and other library patrons. Please indicate below whether SIT/World Learning may release your ISP to host country individuals, organizations, or libraries for educational purposes as determined by SIT.

3.   In addition, World Learning/SIT Study Abroad seeks to include your ISP paper in our digital online collection housed on World Learning's public website. Granting World Learning/SIT Study Abroad the permission to publish your ISP on its website and to reproduce and/or transmit your ISP electronically will enable us to share your ISP with interested members of the World Learning community and the broader public who will be able to access it through ordinary internet searches. Please sign the permission form below in order to grant us the permission to digitize and publish your ISP on our website and publicly available digital collection

Please indicate your permission by checking the corresponding boxes below.

☒	I HEREBY GRANT PERMISSION FOR WORLD LEARNING TO INCLUDE MY ISP IN ITS PERMANENT LIBRARY COLLECTION.
☒	I HEREBY GRANT PERMISSION FOR WORLD LEARNING TO RELEASE MY ISP IN ANY FORMAT TO INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, OR LIBRARIES IN THE HOST COUNTRY FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES AS DETERMINED BY SIT.
☒	I HEREBY GRANT PERMISSION FOR WORLD LEARNING TO PUBLISH MY ISP ON ITS WEBSITES AND IN ANY OF ITS DIGITAL/ELECTRONIC COLLECTIONS, AND TO REPRODUCE AND TRANSMIT MY ISP ELECTRONICALLY. I UNDERSTAND THAT WORLD LEARNING'S WEBSITES AND DIGITAL COLLECTIONS ARE PUBLICLY AVAILABLE VIA THE INTERNET. I AGREE THAT WORLD LEARNING IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY UNAUTHORIZED USE OF MY ISP BY ANY THIRD PARTY WHO MIGHT ACCESS IT ON THE INTERNET OR OTHERWISE.

Student Signature: _____ Date___3/19/10_____

27