Adverse Religious Experiences and LGBTQ+ Adults

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ADVERSE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AND LGBTQ+ ADULTS

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Antioch University New England

In partial fulfillment for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

by

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ADVERSE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AND LGBTQ+ ADULTS

This dissertation, by Alex Fox, has been approved by the committee members signed below who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of Antioch University New England in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

ADVERSE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AND LGBTQ+ ADULTS

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The aim of this study is to explore the ways in which LGBTQ+ people are affected by adverse or traumatic experiences related to religion or spirituality. Many LGBTQ+ adults were reared in environments where negative, disaffirming beliefs or teachings about sexual orientation or gender identity were pervasive. This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis. Participants responded to a brief online survey, the data from which was used for quantitative statistical analysis. Twelve participants were selected at random from a pool of survey volunteers and took part in in-depth interviews regarding adverse religious experiences (AREs). Results of this study suggest that AREs are prevalent for LGBTQ+ individuals who grew up in religious or spiritual environments and that they have had significant psychosocial impacts on survivors. Clinical implications of these findings are discussed, as are directions for future research. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu) and OhioLINK ETD Center (https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: LGBTQ+, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, spirituality, adverse religious experiences, religious trauma
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Religious groups vary widely in their attitudes towards and treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people both within and outside of their communities. When a member of a religious community comes out, responses can range from full acceptance to complete ostracization. Many LGBTQ+ individuals find support and a sense of well-being in affirming religious environments, but as young people, they lack the ability to make the decision for themselves whether they will choose an affirming or disaffirming religious environment. As a result, many LGBTQ+ people carry negative experiences with religion that may impact them far into the future.

Previous research has found that LGBTQ+ individuals tend to suffer poorer physical and mental health outcomes than their heterosexual and/or cisgender peers (Addis et al., 2009; American Psychological Association, 2009, 2021; Arnett et al., 2019; Balsam et al., 2005; Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Bostwick et al., 2010; Brewster et al., 2013, 2014; Burgess et al., 2007; Case et al., 2004; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015, 2019a, 2019b; Cochran & Mays, 2000; Diamant & Wold, 2003; Institute of Medicine, 2011; Jorm et al., 2002; Kann et al., 2015; Koh & Ross, 2006; Marshal et al., 2011; Matthews et al., 2002; McNair et al., 2007; Meyer, 2003; Plöderl & Fartacek, 2009; Plöderl & Tremblay, 2015; Ross et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2011; Semlyen et al., 2016; Su et al., 2016; Wallace & Santacruz, 2017). Some of this difference appears to be the result of internalized homophobia and transphobia (Kjaer, 2003; Plöderl & Fartacek, 2009; Plöderl & Tremblay, 2015). When compared to non-religious same-sex attracted adults, religious adults have been found to exhibit greater internalized homophobia, more depressive symptoms, and worse psychological well-being (Sowe et al., 2014; Wilkerson et al., 2012). Despite these findings, few have examined the effects of what
may be categorized as developmental trauma as the result of religious experiences or explored what may motivate them to choose either to leave or remain within their religion of origin. Developmental trauma, otherwise known as adverse childhood experiences, are often prolonged or repeated throughout childhood. The impact of such “toxic stress” has been researched most extensively in the context of parental loss, abuse, or neglect, but may occur as the result of a variety of factors; it has been associated with chronic mental and physical health issues later in life, including the development of complex posttraumatic stress disorder (CDC, 2021).

Of those who do choose to leave their religion, the majority are able to adapt to life outside of their religious group; some, however, face lingering symptoms of distress for several years or even decades (Fortenbury, 2014; Winell, 2016c). Similarly, many people of all sexual orientations who remain part of religious groups live healthy, happy lives (Davis, 2013; Fortenbury, 2014). Three factors appear to play a part in this disparity in outcomes: type of religious setting, whether an individual aligns with the doctrine of the religious setting, and characteristics of the individual. The first factor considers whether the religious group is authoritarian or humanistic: Authoritarian religious groups prize obedience to the hierarchy and strict adherence to doctrinal rules, often utilizing fear as a method to shelter and control members; humanistic groups focus on support and community in their spiritual practice (Fromm, 2013). This distinction coincides with the way LGBTQ+ individuals describe fundamentalist faiths (authoritarian) versus their more progressive (humanistic) counterparts (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2013b).

The first factor leads into the second: Some individuals are more capable than others of existing harmoniously in an authoritarian religious setting. As a specific example, if one is heterosexual, it is easy to obey and agree with prohibitions against homosexuality. When an
individual’s identity or behavior goes against that prescribed by the group, both internal distress and external consequences can occur. While some progressive groups are beginning to openly accept LGBTQ+ individuals, fundamentalist groups remain hostile. In an interview with prominent Evangelical Christian media personality and psychologist, Dr. James Dobson, fundamentalist Rev. Franklin Graham stated that “you cannot stay gay and continue to call yourself a Christian,” insisting that “the gay person is going to have to repent of their sins and turn from their sins” in order to remain in the fold (Dobson, 2016). This type of authoritarian teaching fosters an environment in which LGBTQ+ individuals are made to feel as though they must undergo sexual orientation change efforts in order to remain an accepted member of the group. Former fundamentalist Christian pastor, Bruce Gerencser (2012) explains:

> Authoritarian churches spend significant time reminding church members that they are to submit to those God has placed in authority. Those who refuse or are unable to obey are often publicly exposed as being worldly, disobedient, carnal, or backslidden. Often pastors preach sermons about these people, not naming names, but leaving no doubt who the pastor is talking about. If the disobedient church members doesn’t [sic] repent, they are likely to find themselves ostracized, under church discipline, or asked to leave the church. (para. 4)

For those raised in an authoritarian religious group, failing to comply with the demands of the group may lead to the loss of the only support system they have ever known, evoking distress and fears of abandonment. Unfortunately, choosing to remain a part of a religion which one has considered leaving has also been shown to contribute to depressive symptoms (May, 2018).

Third, individual differences (e.g., sensitivity, quality of life, age at the time of indoctrination, level of commitment to the religion of origin, biopsychosocial predispositions to
mental illness, etc.) form a large part of how well those who choose to leave authoritarian religions adapt to life outside of their religious group (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Fortenbury, 2014; Gerencser, 2012; Hui et al., 2018; PRC, 2013b; Winell, 2016b). While the majority will recover from the most severe symptoms of guilt, depression, and anxiety in two to three years after leaving their religious group, for some it may take five years or longer (Fortenbury, 2014). Those who were born in raised in highly controlling, fear-based group may be ill-equipped to function in society due to stifled critical thinking skills and lack of mainstream education (Fortenbury, 2014; Tarico, 2013; Winell, 2006). Combined with a tendency for many authoritarian religious groups to denigrate secular mental health services can make it difficult for religious or formerly religious people to reach out for much needed help (Lehmann, 2021; Mathison, 2016). Given the severity of these potential impacts, more research is needed in order to explore the relationship between religious upbringing and LGBTQ+ mental health outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to explore whether type of religious upbringing—non-religious, affirming religious, or disaffirming religious—is experienced as having a lasting effect on LGBTQ+ adults. A mixed-method design allowed for a more informed estimate of the number of LGBTQ+ adults who have been affected by trauma as a result of adverse religious experiences while allowing for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of a small number of participants. Participants who volunteered to take part in one-on-one interviews for the qualitative portion of this study shared deeply moving stories and provided a wealth of thematic data for analysis. In order to best preserve this data and ensure its accessibility to others, significant portions of the interviews have been included within the Results section of this study in great depth.
Definitions of Key Terms

LGBTQ+

While the first four letters of this acronym (lesbian, gay, Bisexual, and transgender) have been widely used since at least the early 1990s, some readers may be less familiar with the others. As the years progressed, the LGBTQ+ community recognized the need to be inclusive of other sexual identities in order to offer more comprehensive representation to the community as a whole. The “Q” is most often used in recognition of the term “queer,” a longtime slur which has been reclaimed by many members of the community. In its current usage, “queer” has become something of an umbrella term used to describe the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. It is also, less frequently, used to represent those “questioning” of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The “+” represents other sexual orientations or gender identities (e.g., pansexual, Two-Spirit, intersex, asexual, etc.). Additionally, bisexual and transgender are terms commonly considered to be “umbrella” terms for many other sexual orientations and gender identities (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). The addition of “Q+” to the original four letters acknowledges the diverse range of sexualities and gender identities represented while remaining a relatively short and memorable acronym for widespread use both inside and outside of the community.
Figure 1.1

*Bisexual Orientations Umbrella*

- Pansexual
- Fluid
- Homoflexible
- Spectralsexual
- Bicurious
- Heteroflexible
- Omnisexual
- Queer

*Note.* Examples of some of the many sexual orientations under the bisexual umbrella.

Figure 1.2

*Trans Identities Umbrella*

- Non-Binary
  - Genderqueer
  - Non-Binary
  - Agender
  - Genderfluid
- Binary
  - Trans Woman
  - Trans Man
- Non-Binary Trans

*Note.* Examples of some of the many gender identities under the trans umbrella.
Internalized Homophobia

Internalized homophobia is a significant obstacle to mental health for sexual minorities (Plöderl & Tremblay, 2015). Internalized homophobia generally forms as a result of conflict between societal, religious, cultural, or familial expectations of sexuality or gender, and is intensified by negative attitudes and harassment received from others. Nonconformity to these expectations and the harassment that often accompanies it are powerful predictors of mental health issues and suicidality in LGBTQ+ individuals (Plöderl & Fartacek, 2009). In contrast, in Norway, where LGBTQ+ individuals are viewed with more universal societal acceptance, mental health disparities are diminished (Kjaer, 2003).

While internalized homophobia is now fairly well represented in the literature, explorations of internalized biphobia or transphobia lag far behind. Bisexual individuals (and those of other orientations under the bisexual umbrella) are placed in the unique position of facing the possibility of negative attitudes, bias, or discrimination from both heterosexual and homosexual peers (Arnett et al., 2019; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Polihronakis et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2015). Existing research suggests that bisexual individuals not only experience internalized biphobia, but also experience more difficulties with identity congruence and suffer from unique behavioral health concerns (Brewster et al., 2014; Hoang et al., 2011). Adaptive traits such as cognitive flexibility provide some mitigating effects, but these benefits quickly deteriorate in the face of high-prejudice environments (Brewster et al., 2013).

Affirming and Disaffirming Religious Environments

Religious or spiritual traditions which are open and inclusive of LGBTQ+ persons are often referred to as “affirming.” These contrast starkly with “disaffirming” (sometimes “nonaffirming”) traditions. Disaffirming religious traditions are frequently authoritarian in
nature: “There is wrong and there is right, and nowhere in between” (Ginicola, 2018, as cited in Meyers, 2018). These religious groups tend to be vocal in their calls for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, and as a result, LGBTQ+ individuals outside of the religious communities can still be directly affected by their beliefs (Meyers, 2018). In addition to these two extremes, many religious traditions fall somewhere in the middle—for instance, welcoming LGBTQ+ people to attend services, but not allowing them to volunteer or minister. Differences of opinion within these middle-of-the-road religious traditions—especially Christian traditions—regarding LGBTQ+ issues have led to well-publicized schisms in recent years in which churches have entirely split from their denominations (M. Anderson, 2020; Bailey, 2015; King, 2019). These “welcoming, but not affirming” religious groups seem less harmful than those who are overtly opposed to LGBTQ+ people, but these more subtle disaffirmations can still accumulate and lead to symptoms of internalized homophobia/biphobia/transphobia and, potentially, lasting trauma (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Cockayne et al., 2020; Jennings, 2016; Meyers, 2018; Winell, 2006, 2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

Religion, Cult, or Something Else?

Though discussions of cults abound in the media and popular culture, differentiating between cults and religious groups can be challenging. It is important to acknowledge that the terms “cult” (used more commonly in the United States and English contexts) and “sect” (used more commonly throughout Europe), as opposed to “religion,” carry with them negative connotations and significant potential for negative labeling or stigmatization (Almendros et al., 2011; Bardin, 2009). Debates regarding the most appropriate term have been ongoing for decades with no clear determination (Almendros et al., 2011; Bardin, 2009; Beckford, 1978; Galanter, 1990; Guerra, 1999; Freckelton, 1998; Hammer & Rothstein, 2012; International
Cultic Studies Association [ICSA], n.d.; Melton, 1997; Richardson, 1993; Rodia, 2019; Rodríguez-Carballeira, 1992; Salinas, 2001; West, 1990; Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). As such, the ICSA (n.d.) urges judicious use of the term “cult,” but offers the following definition:

A cult is an ideological organization, held together by charismatic relationships, and demanding high levels of commitment. Cults are at risk of becoming exploitatively manipulative and abusive to members. Many professionals and researchers use the term ‘cult’ to refer to a continuum of manipulation and abusiveness. (What is a cult? section)

The ICSA website also provides a lengthy and comprehensive checklist of qualities commonly associated with cults and emphasizes the controlling, manipulative, and harmful aspects of cultic activity. The difficulty in determining which religious groups constitute cults/secrets or religions often stems from the subjective interpretation of which beliefs or practices qualify as manipulative or exploitative. Are prohibitions against certain behaviors manipulative, or harmless religious traditions? Are tithes exploitative, or victimless demonstrations of faith? Outside of the most extreme cases, whether a group is best described as a religion, a sect, or a cult is left to the observer to decide. Generally speaking, it is the smaller, often newer, religious groups labeled “cults.” This term denotes, or presumes, some level of deviant or abhorrent behavior. However, many widespread, established religions promote beliefs or behaviors that would likely be viewed as “cult-like” had they originated in a smaller group with less societal approval.

Whatever the chosen terminology—new religious movement, psychologically manipulative group, sect, high-demand group, charismatic group, alternative community, high-intensity faith group, intentional community, isolated authoritarian group, cult, minority religion, etc.—these groups leave a lasting impact on those involved. Available research utilizes
all of these terms, at times interchangeably, making it difficult to generalize findings to the wider population. For clarity, this study will utilize the popular term “cult” when discussing these groups, while acknowledging that the distinction between groups labeled cults and those labeled religious groups is not always clear.

**Deconversion and Disaffiliation**

The terms “deconversion” and “disaffiliation” are both commonly used in discussions of individuals who leave their religions-of-origin. While deconversion suggests a loss of faith in a religion, disaffiliation merely reflects that an individual is no longer a part of or affiliated with a religious group. Disaffiliation, therefore, does not preclude continued practice of a religion or adherence to its beliefs. It is not uncommon for individuals who disagree with or object to some aspect of their religious community’s doctrines or behaviors while still maintaining their own deeply held beliefs (Bromley, 1991, 1998; Cusack, 2020; Rubin, 2011; Thomas, 2019). In contrast, “deconversion encompasses... intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering, and disaffiliation from a community” (Barbour, 1994, p. 2).

**Religious Trauma**

“Trauma” is a term often misunderstood by the public at large and occasionally by clinicians themselves. From a trauma-informed mental health perspective, trauma can be described as resulting from “exposure to an incident or series of events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being” (Center for Health Care Strategies, 2021). Given the lack of understanding around the concept of trauma itself, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Global Center for Religious Research (GCRR) sought to develop a clear definition of “religious trauma” (RT). On November 8, 2020, this team—the North
American Committee on Religious Trauma Research (NACRTR)—released “an official
definition to help characterize the nature, scope, and meaning of ‘religious trauma’” (GCRR, 2020). As the GCRR (2020) explains:

Religious trauma results from an event, series of events, relationships, or circumstances within or connected to religious beliefs, practices, or structures that is experienced by an individual as overwhelming or disruptive and has lasting adverse effects on a person’s physical, mental, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (para. 3)

RT is a phenomenon that can begin while a person is still a part of these events, relationships, or circumstances, and as such can involve experiences of ongoing trauma. Even when individuals distance themselves from these traumatogenic environments, adverse effects can be seen. These individuals “may be going through the shattering of a personally meaningful faith and/or breaking away from a controlling community and lifestyle ... a function of both the chronic abuses of harmful religion and the impact of severing one’s connection with one’s faith” (Winell, 2011, para. 1).

Adverse Religious Experiences

The Religious Trauma Institute (2020) defines an adverse religious experience (ARE) as “any experience of a religious belief, practice, or structure that undermines an individual’s sense of safety or autonomy and/or negatively impacts their physical, social, emotional, relational, or psychological well-being” (para. 2). In 2020, the Religious Trauma Institute launched their Adverse Religious Experiences Survey, an online questionnaire which collects a variety of data regarding AREs. As they continue to collect data, it is possible that a clearer picture regarding the size of the survivor population will emerge. While these two terms are often used
interchangeably, for the sake of clarity, this study will use ARE to refer to the negative, harmful, or traumatic experiences themselves, and RT to refer to the sequela of these experiences.

**Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity Change Efforts**

Sexual orientation or gender identity change efforts (SOCEs/GICEs) include a variety of methods intended to change sexual orientation; this term was developed by the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation to describe this range of techniques with the intention to avoid the use of the term “therapy,” as well as the insinuation that there is a disorder to be treated (American Psychological Association, 2009, 2021). The American Psychological Association is “particularly concerned” about the risk of harm to minors through SOCEs, and research continues to document the harmful consequences of SOCEs and GICEs (American Psychological Association, 2009, 2021; Fish & Russell, 2020). LGBTQ+ youth are already vulnerable in a number of domains, and SOCEs “may be understood as an adverse childhood experience or trauma” (American Psychological Association, 2021, p. 2), which could compound the already significant risk factors (American Psychological Association, 2009; CDC, 2019a; Fish & Russell, 2020). Despite the extensive research and broad consensus amongst clinicians that SOCEs/GICEs are harmful and traumatic practices, they remain legal in many areas and are actively promoted by some religions and organizations (Human Rights Campaign Foundation [HRC], 2020a).

**Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**

Complex posttraumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) has yet to be included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5); however, the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11) recognizes CPTSD as a
distinct diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization [WHO], 2018). Sufferers of CPTSD experience problems in affect regulation, beliefs that they are unworthy, feelings of guilt, shame, or failure related to their traumatic experiences, and can find it difficult to feel close to or sustain relationships with others; these disturbances can cause significant impairment in important areas of functioning (WHO, 2018).

Complex trauma typically refers to repeated or sustained traumatogenic stressors that are interpersonal (i.e., intentionally inflicted by another person or people) rather than impersonal (i.e., the result of random events or accidents). The intentional versus random/accidental causation is thought to cause more severe reactions than those caused by accidents or interpersonal violence that occurs only once (Herman, 1992). Complex trauma typically occurs in closed contexts, often within a family, a close relationship, or an isolated or sheltered social setting (Courtois, 2004; Courtois & Ford, 2009). When these traumatogenic stressors occur during developmentally vulnerable stages in a person’s life (e.g., childhood, adolescence), CPTSD symptoms are more likely to take root and last into adulthood (Cloitre et al., 2006; Ford & Kidd, 1998; Gold, 2000). Unfortunately, certain religious groups establish authoritarian and restrictive environments that can foster cycles of psychological abuse that can lead to significant distress and the development of CPTSD symptoms (McBeath & Greenlees, 2016; Prosser, 2016; Winell, 2006, 2016a, 2016c). Since religious trauma generally occurs gradually throughout long-term exposure to harmful messages, these social systems can create ideal conditions for the development of CPTSD symptoms (Stone, 2013).

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which LGBTQ+ people have been affected by adverse religious experiences, as well as the ways in which religious trauma
may continue to affect them as adults. The following chapter reviews the extant literature regarding (a) health concerns specific to the LGBTQ+ population; (b) the prevalence of religious affiliation in the greater United States population; (c) religious affiliation in the LGBTQ+ population; (d) adverse religious experiences and religious trauma; (e) insights into AREs/RTs gleaned from adjacent disciplines (e.g., cultic studies); (f) religious and spiritual abuse; (g) traumatogenic religious settings, as well as a brief exploration of a religious tradition frequently referenced in the literature, Evangelical Christianity; and (h) resources for recovery from AREs/RT. Research into AREs/RT as distinct phenomena is still in its infancy, and as such, much of the available literature is limited to anecdotal and clinical evidence.

This is a mixed-methods study which utilized descriptive statistics in order to gain a clearer understanding of the prevalence and severity of AREs and RT within the LGBTQ+ population. Additionally, this study utilized thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology in order to provide insight into the effects of AREs and RT on the lives of participants. For a full exploration of methodology, including recruitment, participants, and methods of analysis, please see the Study Design section of the Methods chapter.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Health Concerns of LGBTQ+ Individuals

Physical Health and Safety

LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to be bullied, threatened or injured at school, experience sexual or physical dating violence, and forced to have sexual intercourse than other students (Kann et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2011). According to CDC data, LGB students were 140% (12% vs. 5%) more likely to stay out of school due to safety concerns when compared with heterosexual students (CDC, 2017). This study also found that “LGB youth are at a greater risk for depression, suicide, substance use, and sexual behaviors that can place them at increased risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases” (CDC, 2017, Effects on Education and Mental Health section, para. 2). The CDC (2019b) reports that men who have sex with men (MSM) account for 69% of new youth HIV diagnoses. LGBTQ+ individuals are also less likely to have health insurance and more likely to delay seeking care—this is perhaps unsurprising, given that they are also significantly more likely to report poor quality of care, unfair treatment, and a lack of cultural competence on the part of providers (Burgess et al., 2007; HRC, 2020b; Jennings et al., 2019; SAGE, 2018; Su et al., 2016). Transgender individuals in particular face issues of bias and lack of knowledgeable providers when seeking health care (Safer et al., 2016). In countries with relatively higher levels of support for same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights, disparities with regard to certain health factors (e.g., smoking, fair/poor self-rated health) have been found to be lower than in countries with lower levels of support, suggesting that local attitudes towards and support of LGBTQ+ individuals may contribute to these health disparities (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017).
**Mental Health**

In addition to physical health disparities, the LGBTQ+ population “bears a disproportionate burden of mental health issues relative to the general population” (Su et al., 2016). LGBTQ+ individuals have consistently been shown to experience symptoms of mental illness with greater frequency than their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Bostwick et al., 2010; Burgess et al., 2007; Cochran et al., 2003; Cochran & Mays, 2000; Institute of Medicine, 2011; Marshall et al., 2011; Matthews et al., 2002; Meyer, 2003; Semlyen et al., 2016; Su et al., 2016). Relative to cisgender LGB individuals, trans individuals are even more likely to experience discrimination, depressive symptoms, and to attempt suicide (Su et al., 2016). While the majority of studies combine bisexual participants with gay and lesbian participants, those which examine bisexual people separately note that they report poorer mental health than heterosexuals and, in some studies, than their monosexual peers (Balsam et al., 2005; Case et al., 2004; Diamant & Wold, 2003; Jorm et al., 2002; Koh & Ross, 2006; McNair et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2010; Tjepkema 2008). These mental health disparities are particularly apparent among LGBTQ+ youth; they may be exacerbated by stigma, discrimination, victimization, or other negative experiences (Marshall et al., 2011). LGBTQ+ high school students are dramatically more likely to have seriously considered, planned, or attempted suicide than their heterosexual peers (CDC, 2019a). On a positive note, LGBTQ+ individuals may receive more mental health benefits from supportive social relationships (Hsieh, 2014).
Figure 2.1

Active Suicidal Ideation in High School Students by Sexual Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual (straight)</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay or lesbian</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>48.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay, lesbian, or bisexual</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 2.2

Suicidal Planning in High School Students by Sexual Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual (straight)</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay or lesbian</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay, lesbian, or bisexual</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentage of high school students who made a plan about how they would attempt suicide in the United States, 2019. From “YRBS Explorer,” by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019. In the public domain.
In addition to risk factors in school and romantic relationships, LGBTQ+ youth also face obstacles in their families. Half of all gay males have experienced a negative parental reaction when coming out, and in 26% of those cases, they were subsequently thrown out of the home; between 11% and 45% of all homeless youth at any given time identify as LGBTQ+, often as a result of being running away or being kicked out of their homes after being outed or coming out voluntarily (Choi et al., 2015; Durso & Gates, 2012; Gattis, 2009; Wells, 2009). Many others age out or run away from the foster care system for fear of being subjected to violence there (Keuroghlian et al., 2014). LGBTQ+ youth who access homelessness services are reported to have been homeless longer, and to have more physical and mental health problems than their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Choi et al., 2015).

**Prevalence of Religious Beliefs and Attitudes Towards LGBTQ+ Individuals**

The PRC’s second *Religious Landscape Study* surveyed over 35,000 Americans from all over the country about their religious identities, practices, and beliefs in 2014. According to their data, 76.5% of the population of the United States identifies as belonging to a religious faith. While Christians still make up the largest proportion of Americans (70.6%), those who identified their religious affiliation as “none” formed second largest cohort (22.8%). The population
identifying as “unaffiliated” has grown substantially over the past decade and over one-third of American “millennials” describe themselves as religious “nones.”

Various reasons lead Americans to leave their religion of origin, but leading causes include no longer believing in the religion’s teachings (60%), lower religious commitment growing up (32%), and the experience of negative religious teachings regarding the LGBTQ+ community (Public Religion Research Institute [PRRI], 2016). Religions vary widely with regards to their doctrines and expressed attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals, overall public opinion in the United States has warmed significantly over the years—an attitudinal change not reflected in the teachings of many religious groups (Flores, 2014). Even though societal views towards the LGBTQ+ population have shifted positively over the past decade, Americans who identify as highly religious are significantly more likely than others to express the belief that homosexuality should be discouraged instead of accepted and oppose same-sex marriage (PRC, 2013a). Given the negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights and individuals, it is perhaps unsurprising that LGBTQ+ adults tend to be less religious than the population as a whole (PRC, 2013b).

A PRC (2013b) survey of LGBTQ+ American adults found that approximately 48% have no religious affiliation. One-third of all LGBTQ+ adults who are religious stated that there was a conflict between their religious beliefs and their sexual orientation. Amongst all LGBTQ+ adults, 29% stated that they had been made to feel unwelcome in their place of worship. When compared to non-religious same-sex attracted adults, religious same-sex attracted adults have been found to exhibit higher scores on measures of internalized homo-negativity, depressive symptoms, and worse psychological well-being overall (Sowe et al., 2014; Wilkerson et al., 2012).
Negative attitudes and behaviors towards LGBTQ+ individuals on the part of religious groups can range from creating a disaffirming atmosphere (e.g., preaching that homosexuality is wrong or sinful, ostracizing openly LGBTQ+ people from the community, etc.) to active attempts to alter sexual orientation through extreme measures (e.g., exorcism, conversion therapy, etc.; Masci & Lipka, 2015; PRC, 2013a). In 2009, American Psychological Association issued a report rejecting SOCE, both questioning its effectiveness based on available research and to address potential consequences that can arise as individuals attempt to reconcile the dissonance between their religion and sexuality:

The distress experienced by religious individuals appeared intense, for not only did they face sexual stigma from society at large but also messages from their faith that they were deficient, sinful, deviant, and possibly unworthy of salvation unless they changed sexual orientation. (pp. 46–47)

While research has shown little evidence of success and myriad negative consequences to SOCEs, SOCEs are only the most well-publicized of the challenges faced by religious LGBTQ+ people: religious LGBTQ+ individuals also face threats of abuse and ostracization by their families, friends, and communities (American Psychological Association, 2009). Disaffirming religious settings may predict internalized homo-negativity, depressive symptoms, distress, and worse psychological well-being (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Sherry et al., 2010; Sowe et al., 2014; Wilkerson et al., 2012).

**Religious Affiliation in LGBTQ+ Individuals**

Despite some LGBTQ+ individuals negative experiences in disaffirming religious environments and the prevalence of adverse religious experiences (AREs), many continue to seek spiritual communities elsewhere (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Some LGBTQ+ individuals
lament the loss of the sense of shared spiritual identity and fellowship provided by their previous disaffirming affiliations, despite the problems with acceptance of LGBTQ+ members, to the point of experiencing grief and loss for their previous religious identities (Hansen & Lambert, 2011). This encourages many to transition from a disaffirming environment to an affirming one later in their lives (Kocet et al., 2011; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). Many others choose to leave religion behind altogether, and LGBTQ+ adults tend to be less religious than their heterosexual or cisgender peers (Barnes & Meyer, 2012).

Religious affiliation can be a complicated factor in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Religious families from sects that hold negative views of LGBTQ+ people often find it difficult to accept that their children’s identities violate their religious expectations (Malcomnson et al., 2006; Willoughby et al., 2010). Similarly, LGBTQ+ individuals growing up in these environments must reconcile their religion’s disaffirming doctrines and AREs with their own developing minority identities, adding to their stress as developing adults. The potential for exclusion from their religious community based on their identities leads many LGBTQ+ youths and adults to stay in the closet, or to seek out or be forced into problematic alternatives such as SOCEs in order to “cure” them (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Flentje et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2020; M. D. Walker, 2013; Wolff et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2018). Conservative or authoritarian religious beliefs have been linked to higher levels of shame, guilt, and internalized homophobia, and religious sexual minority or questioning youth are as much as three times more likely to have attempted suicide recently than their non-religious peers (Lytle et al., 2018; Markham, 2018; Sherry et al., 2010). Whether these individuals choose to remain within their religion of origin or depart, these are conditions capable of leaving a lasting impact.
Adverse Religious Experiences, Religious Trauma, and Internalized Homophobia

Some previous research has attempted to establish a direct link between exposure to disaffirming religious environments and AREs, RT, internalized homophobia, and negative mental health outcomes. When compared to non-religious same-sex attracted adults, religious adults have been found to exhibit greater internalized homonegativity and distress (Sowe et al., 2014; Wilkerson et al., 2012). Barnes and Meyer (2012) also found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals “who opt for affirming settings or who have no religious affiliation at all have significantly lower levels of internalized homophobia than those who opt for non-affirming settings” (p. 512). Interestingly, this same study found that while disaffirming religious affiliation did not have the same negative impact on mental health; however, when internalized homophobia was included in the models, “non-affirming religion became a stronger predictor” for both more depressive symptoms and worse psychological well-being in the individuals studied (Barnes & Meyer, 2012, p. 512).

These influences can be even more salient when cultural and ethnic factors are taken into consideration. Barnes and Meyer (2012) also found differences between the Caucasian, Black, and Latino LGBTQ+ individuals studied. The authors theorized that in Black and Latino communities, religious life is more closely intertwined with cultural/social life, and those individuals were therefore less likely to remove themselves from disaffirming religious environments for fear of losing the other aspects of community. Other research on the effects of religious affiliation on the internalized homophobia and mental health of various minorities seems to comport with these results—cultural issues do seem to interact with and compound the negative effects of disaffirming religious environments (Lassiter, 2016; Shilo & Mor, 2014; J. J. Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). This is especially true in the case of cultural and sexual
minorities under other stress factors, such as those forced to immigrate into another country and culture in order to escape dire economic situations or violence (especially when the threat of violence is related to their LGBTQ+ identity; Shidlo & Ahola, 2013).

**Adverse Religious Experiences, Religious Trauma, and Mental Health**

Historically, the psychological impact of religion has been poorly studied (Belzen, 2000; Paloutzian & Park, 2005). However, in recent years, an explosion of research has taken place, revealing that religion and spirituality influence virtually every aspect of human functioning. Effects on personality, emotion, cognition, health, adjustment, and clinical presentation are now well-documented (Allport, 1950; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Fromm, 2013; George et al., 2002; Hill et al., 2000; Hood et al., 2018; Paloutzian & Park, 2005; Pargament, 2013; Seybold & Hill, 2001). The vast majority of these studies focus on religion or spirituality in the context of their contribution to coping and psychological adjustment. Several studies have found that individuals with strong religious affiliation experience better health and well-being than disaffiliates—those who have left their religion. Interestingly, those who are consistently unaffiliated with religion also experience better health and well-being than those who leave religious traditions (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; May, 2018).

Despite the prevailing view that religion and spirituality are assets with regards to coping, results of this research have been mixed (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; BJORCK et al., 1997; Brewster et al., 2016; Johnson & Hayes, 2003; Pargament et al., 2000; Pargamet et al., 1998; Yi & BJORCK, 2014). Moreover, the effects of spirituality or religious belief on individuals with symptoms of mental illness (e.g., anxiety, psychosis) are particularly complex, with the potential to exacerbate symptoms (Amjad & Bokharey, 2014, 2015; Koenig, 2009). Research regarding the potential for religion to be a source of harm or trauma is comparatively rare, leaving
Clinicians to extrapolate from research into survivors of cults or sects, or survivors of sexual abuse at the hands of clergy, which may not be applicable to their clients who feel as though they have been harmed or traumatized by religion. This lack of research into the potential for religion to be a source of harm does a disservice to both clinicians and their clients (Seybold & Hill, 2001; Stone, 2013).

There is, however, a plethora of examples outside of the academic literature that provide examples of traumatic events stemming from religion. Stone (2013) argues that “this disparity suggests that the professional literature does not yet accurately reflect the potentially harmful impact of religion and spirituality or the abundance of concerns people have in these areas” (p. 323). Unfortunately, since Stone’s article was published, the progress of new research into the phenomenon of religious trauma continues to be slow.

In 2011, the British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychologists published a series of articles by Marlene Winell describing a phenomenon that Winell calls “religious trauma syndrome” (RTS). This series of articles stood out as one of the few examples of emergent research focused on the potential for religion to cause harm to individuals rather than serving as a factor in psychological well-being (Stone, 2013). Winell (2016a) defines RTS as “the condition experienced by people who are struggling with leaving an authoritarian, dogmatic religion and coping with the damage of indoctrination” (What Is RTS? section, para. 2). These controlling environments with rigidly defined rules and expectations can have lasting effects on those who question, disobey, or fail to meet the standards required—sometimes even years after leaving the authoritarian religious environment (Fortenbury, 2014; Prosser, 2016; Winell, 2006). While it is unclear whether RTS rises to the level of distinctiveness necessary to warrant a unique diagnosis, many symptoms of religious trauma mirror those of victims of psychological abuse or complex
post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD; Fortenbury, 2014; Winell, 2011). However, the anecdotal and clinical data available suggest that many of those questioning or abandoning long-held religious beliefs experience a deep sense of loss, confusion, and, at times, existential despair (Fallon, 2021).

**Insights from Cultic Studies**

Cultic studies throughout the years have provided some insight into the psychological effects of religious involvement and disaffiliation. As previously discussed, the distinction between cult and religion is not always clear, and many of the factors that contribute to religious trauma (e.g., authoritarian environments, isolation/alienation from outside beliefs or people, abusive behaviors, etc.) may also be present within cults (Bardin, 2009; Faulkner, 2009; Gibson et al., 2017; Oblack, 2019; Shaw, 2014; Wright, 2001). Research and discussion of cults thrived beginning in the mid-twentieth century and continued through the 1990s following the rise of several well-publicized groups, some of which later committed terrible crimes (e.g., Aum Shinrikyo, The Manson Family, Matamoros), were found to have conducted long-term abuse (e.g., Children of God, Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints [FLDS], Jehovah’s Witnesses) or came to horrific ends (e.g., Branch Davidians, Heaven’s Gate, Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, Order of the Solar Temple, The Peoples Temple). With the advent of the twenty-first century, it seems that research into such groups slowed. In the past few years, however, events have placed some of these groups in the spotlight (e.g., the Jehovah’s Witness sexual abuse scandal, the popular Netflix documentary on the Rajneeshpuram group, Arts and Entertainment’s documentary series chronicling the experiences of those who have left Scientology, the arrests and convictions of the leaders of NXIVM, etc.) and led to increased public and research interest (Holzman et al., 2016–2019;
Hong & Piccoli, 2021; C. Jones, 2020; Way & Way, 2018). The diverse perspectives of researchers and the methodological limitations of most studies (e.g., self-selected participants, limited use of standardized assessment measures, retrospective studies which may result in reinterpretation biases, etc.) makes it impossible to determine how generalizable these results are amongst former cult members or to determine which, if any, of these results may be applicable to those who disaffiliate from more mainstream religious groups. It is important to consider that some of the available literature is published or developed by anti-cult organizations which may have religious foundations. For example, the International Cultic Studies Foundation (ICSA) was founded as the American Family Foundation (AFF), and has had past links with Evangelical Christian counter-cult movements such as the Christian Research Institute. The AFF/ICSA has been the publisher of *The Advisor, Cult Observer, Cultic Studies Journal, and Cultic Studies Review*. Between these past publications and their current scholarly research journal, the *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, this single organization is responsible for the publication of the majority of cultic studies research.

Available research into cultic communities indicates that these individuals are often left in socially precarious positions which can make it difficult to leave (Rousselet et al., 2017). While the level of social isolation tends to be more pronounced in groups identified as cults, some level of social isolation may also be present in authoritarian religious groups (e.g., separations from non-religious loved ones, home or private religious schooling, etc.). In many cases, growing disillusionment and awareness of contradictions between group doctrine and actual events leads individuals to leave these communities (Almendros et al., 2007; Buxand & Saroglou, 2008; Rousselet et al., 2017). Psychological abuse often contributes to individuals’ decisions to leave, and this type of abuse has been shown to be the most common form of
violence in cultic communities (Almendros et al., 2011). However, psychological abuse is a concept difficult to quantify and, until recently, there has been no validated scale for consistent use in studies of psychological abuse within group contexts (Almendros et al., 2011; Saldaña et al., 2017). Involvement of social supports or family intervention can be important bridges back to a wider society and reintegration (Faulkner, 2009; Rousselet et al., 2017; Union Nationale des Associations de Défense des Familles et de l’Individu Victimes de Sectes [UNADFI], 2009). When these supports are not available, dependency upon the group and the cult leader often leads members to stay despite any psychological or physical risks (Almendros et al., 2011; Garand, 2013).

Those who do leave their communities may experience a range of impacts. Some may experience a loss of faith, while others continue to practice their religion outside the group (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Rubin, 2011; Thomas, 2019). While there is no uniform post-cult experience, some individuals leave cults after with a positive view of their experience, while others become embittered or critical of the group (Bromley, 1998; Kliever, 1995; Namini & Murken, 2009; Pannofino & Cardano, 2017; Thorn, 2021). Former members who have had negative experiences may experience adjustment difficulties or develop symptoms of mental illness following their departure, some of which may include: anger, anxiety, confusion, continued dependency, decreased self-confidence, depression, dissociation, guilt, passivity, and psychosis (Cusack, 2020; Efird et al., 2020; Freckelton, 1998; Kern & Jungbauer, 2022; Singer & Lalich, 1995). In the case of high-demand, authoritarian groups, psychological consequences have been seen with current members as well (McBeath & Greenlees, 2016; Potter, 1985; Spencer, 1975). Unfortunately, many clinicians do not feel prepared to address these symptoms in order to support former cult members (Lottick, 2008). This is perhaps understandable, as
specific guidance for therapists working with this population has been written about only occasionally throughout the years (Faulkner, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2017; Jenkinson, 2013; Langone, 1993; Musseb et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2011). The majority of the literature focuses on identifying or defining cults, documentation of symptoms, deprogramming, exit counseling, self-help, or support for loved ones of cult members (Chrnalogar, 1997; Hassan, 2000, 2012, 2018; Landau Tobias et al., 1994; Melton, 1997, 2004; Richardson, 1993, 2007).

These adjustment and mental health outcomes are similar, if not identical, to those described by former members of mainstream religious groups who disaffiliate or deconvert (Barbour, 1994; Bromley, 1991; Bullivant, 2016; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Fortenbury, 2014; May, 2018; Meyers, 2018; Prosser, 2016; PRRI, 2016; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989; Sapp, 2019; Stone, 2013; Tarico, 2013; Winell, 2006, 2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). In a three-year prospective study, Hui et al. (2018) found that changes in psychological symptoms following disaffiliation for a group of Chinese Protestant Christians were multi-trajectory, with approximately half experiencing improvement and the other half deterioration. While it is unclear precisely which factors lead to positive or negative adjustment and mental health outcomes for those who disaffiliate from either cults or mainstream religions, former members of all religious groups appear to experience a variety of disaffiliation effects.

**Religious and Spiritual Abuse**

Cults are often associated with abuse, but repeated revelations of widespread abuse (e.g., sexual abuse scandals within the Catholic Church, the FLDS, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Southern Baptist Convention have all been in the news in recent years) within mainstream religious groups makes it clear that abuse is not confined to isolated fringe groups (The Associated Press [AP], 2021; British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2021; Meyer, 2021;
Stauffer, 2019). While physical, sexual, and psychological abuse have all been documented, it is thought that psychological abuse is the most frequent form of abuse within both cults and mainstream religious groups (Almendros et al., 2007, 2011; Chrnalogar, 2000; Knapp, 2021; Purcell, 1998). Individuals experiencing religious or spiritual abuse are often placed in a position where their potential sources of support—family members, friends, faith leaders—are perpetrators of or complicit with the abuse. This contributes to systems and institutions in which abuse may continue uninterrupted for years, potentially leading to the development of symptoms similar to those of PTSD or CPTSD (L. Anderson, 2019; Cockayne et al., 2020; Fallon, 2021; Faulkner, 2009; Gerencser, 2012; Knight et al., 2019; Sapp, 2019; Stone, 2013; Turpin, 2020; Winell, 2006, 2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Depending on the level of control exerted by a religious group, members may experience emotional or spiritual abuse, economic control, threats and intimidation, isolation, and an overall loss of autonomy (L. Anderson, n.d.). Should members resist the control efforts of the religious group, they may find themselves ostracized or expelled. After living within the social sphere of a religious group for a significant period of time, expulsion may add to the trauma of disaffiliation. As one expelled member of a religious group explained, it has been impossible for her to forget the looks of “absolute disgust and utter disdain” she received from her former friends (D’Souza, 2021, as cited in Fallon, 2021, para. 1).

**Traumatogenic Religious Settings**

Religious trauma is often linked to authoritarian and fundamentalist religious traditions, and is by no means confined to one particular religious faith. Nevertheless, the majority of published RT research at this time focuses on Evangelical Christianity. Evangelical Christianity differs from both Catholicism and mainline Protestantism in several major ways, and these differences contribute to an authoritarian atmosphere more easily than many other faith
traditions. Given the prevalence of Evangelical Christianity in the literature, a brief review of their distinguishing characteristics may be useful. While Evangelical communities differ slightly in their doctrines, their central beliefs may be summarized as follows: (a) the Bible is inerrant and accurate in all of its claims about the divine and the nature of the universe; (b) the only way to salvation is through belief in Jesus Christ; (c) individuals must personally accept salvation (also known as being “born-again”); (d) there is a need to proselytize, or evangelize, their beliefs (Green, 2004, as cited in Aronson, 2004). These beliefs, especially the first, lead many Evangelical religious groups to be more fundamentalist and authoritarian than mainline groups. As such, some of these beliefs and practices provide useful illustrations of potential AREs and traumatogenic religious experiences.

Evangelical Christian churches generally preach literal interpretations of the Bible, which extends to an apocalyptic view of the end times as well as the existence of a physical hell. These beliefs are reflected in a variety of media produced by Evangelical individuals and groups. One famous film series, the *Thief in the Night* (Thompson, 1972), focuses on stories of the Rapture (i.e., an event during which true Christians will be miraculously transported to heaven, leaving the rest of humanity behind) and the Tribulation (i.e., a series of apocalyptic, torturous events which those left behind on earth will be forced to endure). This film series includes several violent and disturbing scenes, but was nevertheless extremely popular in Evangelical circles. It featured one of the earliest Christian rock hits, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” (Norman, 1969), which laments the loss of those left behind and has remained firmly entrenched in the Evangelical consciousness. The film series was never completed, and therefore never reached the point of depicting the Second Coming of Christ (i.e., the event following the Tribulation during which Jesus Christ will return to earth to judge those left behind before they are cast into the lake
of fire alongside Satan and the antichrist, where they will suffer eternal punishment). However, the *Left Behind* novels and film series, heavily inspired by the *Thief in the Night* films, gained even wider acclaim and cemented this interpretation of end times theology in the minds of many Evangelical Christians (Jenkins & LaHaye, 2008).

In addition to the ever-present threat of the end times and eternal judgment, fear of deviation from “Biblical values” is also cultivated in many groups. Another Evangelical Christian film, *M 10:28: A Truthful Story* (Neubauer, 1999), chronicling a teen’s descent into hell and subsequent torture, has found popularity in many Evangelical youth ministries since its release. Many Evangelical churches host horrifying “alternative Halloween” events like “Trip to Hell” or “Hell House,” where groups of all ages walk through horrific scenes of sinners being tortured, maimed, or killed (Fletcher, 2007; Shea, 2013). Other media, including *The Screwtape Letters* (Lewis, 1942/2015) and *This Present Darkness* (Peretti, 1986), has been used to cultivate belief in territorial spirits—demons which are intent on subjugating humanity and finding ways to doom them to hell (notably, *The Screwtape Letters* was written in a satirical, epistolary style and was never intended to be interpreted literally as it is in some Evangelical fundamentalist circles). For those who believe in territorial spirits, “worldly” activities such as smoking, drinking alcohol, gambling, etc., are depicted as having the potential to draw oppressive demons, which can then become attached to a person. Engagement in other semi-spiritual practices (e.g., meditation, yoga) can do even worse—these may open a person up to being possessed by a demon (for some Evangelical Christians, adherents to other religious traditions are being deceived by demonic entities). These and similar beliefs have real-world consequences, such as the legislation which banned yoga in Alabama public schools for approximately 30 years (Chappell, 2021).
Evangelical Christian groups have consistently opposed the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights—much more so than other Christians (Masci & Lipka, 2015; PRC, 2014). Evangelical Christians believe that LGBTQ+ Christians may only be “welcomed and affirmed” within the church if they “live faithfully in accordance with biblical teaching” and “have committed themselves to chastity by refraining from homoerotic sexual practice” (i.e., refrain from same-sex sexual activity and romantic relationships; Evangelical Alliance, 2012, Affirmations 4, 7). LGBTQ+ Evangelicals who do not wish to remain celibate are then left with two options—going against the church or attempting SOCEs. Combined with the threat of divine judgment and hell, LGBTQ+ Evangelical Christians, along with others in fundamentalist, authoritarian religious groups, are at increased risk of exposure to AREs and possibly at greater risk for RT.

Sapp (2019) shares a particularly vivid childhood memory:

I remember being in a Sunday school class as a young child of 6 or 7 years of age. The Sunday school teacher came in with a large metal bucket and a toy baby doll. She put the baby doll in the metal tub, lit it on fire, and told the class if we didn’t accept Jesus as our savior that this is what would happen to us as well. We would burn in hell. So began my experience of trauma and religion. (p. 17)

Sapp’s (2019) experience, while dramatic, is by no means unique. Given the potential damage of RT, and the position of LGBTQ+ Evangelicals as unworthy of salvation due to their identities, the effects of AREs on this population are in urgent need of further study.

**Resources for Recovery**

With the growing public profile of religious trauma, more resources have become available for those experiencing it. In addition to the growing availability of therapist trainings and specialty services, community organizations are providing aid to fellow RT survivors.
Sherrie D’Souza, a former member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, explained to journalist Amy Fallon (2021):

I gave my life, so much of my life, to religion—and I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make sense of that... But I can do something with the life I have now. I have to help others to make sense of the madness and all of the things that I’ve lost. (p. 26)

D’Souza and her husband were “disfellowshipped” from the Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2019 after speaking out against the religious group; after learning of the Recovery from Religion (RfR) organization, she founded a local chapter in Sydney, Australia. Since founding the group, meetings have continued to grow and additional chapters are being planned (Fallon, 2021).

Another RT peer support group, the Ex-Religious Support Network (ESN), provides real-time support to former members of religious groups. This group, too, is expanding rapidly (Fallon, 2021). Religious “nones,” disaffiliation, and deconversion are all on the rise throughout much of the West (Barbour, 1994; Bromley, 1991; Bullivant, 2016; Perl & Gray, 2007; PRC, 2014; PRRI, 2016; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). As more and more people disaffiliate or deconvert from their religions-of-origin, it is likely that resources for those experiencing RT symptoms will become more necessary than ever.

Summary

Researchers and clinicians have documented extensive evidence that LGBTQ+ individuals suffer disproportionately from physical and mental health concerns. These disparities seem to be attributable in part to the effects of stigma, bias, discrimination, differences in access to adequate care, internalized homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia, and a myriad of other factors. Religious trauma, while not confined exclusively to the LGBTQ+ community, affects many LGBTQ+ individuals who spent time within religious traditions with disaffirming beliefs,
practices, or structures may experience long-term delirious effects on their physical, mental, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

**Research Questions**

Since “the academic study of religious trauma remains in its infancy when compared to other studies in mental health,” it is critical that new research be undertaken in order to bridge this knowledge gap (GCRR, 2020, Where Is the Empirical Data? section, para. 2). This study hopes to contribute to the existing knowledge base by examining the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals who have a history of exposure to adverse religious experiences and may have experienced the effects of religious trauma. This study aims to address the following questions:

- How frequent is exposure to adverse religious experiences within the LGBTQ+ population?

- What were the AREs participants were exposed to, and how do they view them as having affected them throughout their lives?

- Do participants feel as though they were affected more strongly by disaffirming religious beliefs or doctrines and AREs in their youth or as adults? In other words, have any effects of religious trauma dissipated over time? What is the correlation between negative or disaffirming religious beliefs or doctrines and perceived impact upon participants?

- How many participants considered or underwent sexual orientation or gender identity change efforts? Who was responsible for initiating these change efforts?

- Have participants remained within their religion-of-origin? If not, do they participate in any religious or spiritual traditions? Has the importance of religion or spirituality changed for participants over time?
CHAPTER III: METHODS

This study utilized a mixed-method approach to data collection and analysis. Blending quantitative and qualitative elements allowed for an estimate of the number of LGBTQ+ adults who have been impacted by adverse religious experiences (AREs), while also allowing for a detailed exploration of the lived experiences of a small number of participants. The quantitative portion of the study utilized an online survey in order to assess type of religious upbringing and current adjustment in adult participants. The survey began with the collection of relevant demographic information (e.g., sexual identity, sexual orientation) followed by questions assessing the type of religious environment in which they were raised, as well as their experiences related to religion and spirituality vis-à-vis their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Participants

Recruitment

Participants were recruited over the internet via social media advertisement. Facebook and Twitter, two free social media platforms with broad user bases, were used to publish public calls for participants. Within these advertisements, participants were provided with a link that directed them to the survey. Upon completion of this survey, participants were asked whether they would be willing to participate in the interview portion of the study. Twelve of those volunteers were then selected at random and interviewed for the qualitative portion of the study.
Sample Social Media Recruitment Advertisement

Volunteers needed for a research study into the experiences of LGBTQ+ people who grew up in religious or spiritual environments. If this describes you, please take part in this short survey!

[Survey URL]


Sample Size

Since there were no clear data available regarding the number of LGBTQ+ adults who grew up in religious households, it is necessary to extrapolate numbers from the greater population of LGBTQ+ adults. In the United States, the estimated number of adults identifying as LGBT is 5.6% of the population (J. M. Jones, 2021). Based on a population of 331,893,745, this works out to approximately 18,561,160 individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The Trevor Project’s National Survey on LGBTQ Mental Health found that 39% of LGBTQ individuals ages
13–24 were religious (The Trevor Project, 2019). However, an estimated 47% of LGBT adults in the United States say that religion is important to them, that they attend religious services, or both (Williams Institute, 2020). The wide range of estimates may be a reflection of differences in study methodology, a decrease in overall religiosity over time, an increase in religiosity as individuals age, or a variety of other factors. Due to the disparities in data, it is impossible to know precisely how many LGBTQ+ individuals grew up within religious or spiritual environments. In order to produce a conservative sample size and allow for maximum variability within the population, a proportion of 0.5, or 50%, was used to determine the ideal sample size for this study. Per Cochran’s Formula, the ideal sample size for the quantitative portion of this study would have required 385 participants. This would have allowed for a confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of 5%, which would generate the most statistically sound and generalizable results. However, at the time of publication this threshold had yet to be met, resulting in a confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of 7.5%.

**Informed Consent**

At the start of the survey, participants were presented with information regarding informed consent (see Table 3.2). This included the purpose of the study, confidentiality of information provided, an explanation of the risks and benefits of participation, and researcher contact information. Following the survey, if participants indicated that they were willing to be contacted for an interview, they were presented with additional informed consent information. This additionally included the purpose and process of the interview, the use of audio recording and secure storage/destruction thereof, and the option to withdraw consent at any time. They were then presented with the option to indicate consent by providing an email address in order to be contacted for an interview.
### Table 3.1

**Informed Consent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General/Survey</th>
<th>Interview Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This survey will ask you several questions about yourself, your background, and your experiences. This researcher wants to know how adults over the age of 18 view their experiences growing up in religious households. These results will be used to better understand how different types of religious upbringings affect LGBTQ+ people. There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation may help others in the future. The survey typically takes about 5–10 minutes to complete. There are minimal, if any, risks from participating. Some of the questions may be upsetting, or bring up upsetting memories. Your identity will be kept confidential. You will not be asked for your name and all demographic data being collected will be reported as aggregated information. No personally identifiable information will be associated with your responses to any reports of these data. This survey is part of my dissertation research at Antioch University New England in the PsyD in Clinical Psychology Program. The study results may also be included in future presentations and publications. Taking part is voluntary and you may elect to discontinue your participation at any time. If you have any questions about the survey or the research study, please contact me at [REDACTED]. This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Antioch University New England. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Kevin Lyness, Chair of the Antioch University New England IRB, at [REDACTED], or Shawn M. Fitzgerald, PhD, CEO Antioch University New England &amp; Dean of the Graduate School of Counseling, Psychology, and Therapy, at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. By submitting this survey, you are indicating that you have read and understood this consent form, are at least 18 years of age, and agree to participate in this research study.</td>
<td>These interviews may be conducted via telephone, Zoom, or Zoom Chat, depending on your preference. Each of these interviews will be audio recorded solely for research purposes. All information will be de-identified, so that it cannot be connected back to you. Your real name will be replaced by a pseudonym in any write-up of this project, and only the primary researcher will have access to the confidential list connecting your name to the pseudonym. This list, along with any recordings of the discussion sessions, will be kept in a secure, locked location, or an encrypted drive and destroyed upon conclusion of the study. Participation is completely voluntary. Should you choose to participate in an interview, you may stop at any time. You may withdraw from this study at any time—if an interview has already taken place, the information you provided will not be used in the research study. If you are willing to be contacted to participate in an interview and consent to the terms above, please provide your email address below. By providing your email address, you are indicating that you have read and understood this consent form, are at least 18 years of age, are willing to be audio recorded, and agree to participate in this research study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Item</td>
<td>Response Options</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Age:</td>
<td>☐ 18–25</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ 26–35</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ 36–45</td>
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<td>☐ 46–55</td>
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<td>☐ 56–65</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ 66–75</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ 76+</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Location (Country):</td>
<td><em>(Fill in the blank)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is your current location the</td>
<td>☐ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>same as your country of origin?</td>
<td>☐ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>(If no to Item 3)</em> Country</td>
<td><em>(Fill in the blank)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>of Origin:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. How would you describe your</td>
<td>☐ American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
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<tr>
<td>race, culture, and/or ethnicity?</td>
<td>☐ Asian</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Black</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Hispanic or Latino</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Indigenous Australian</td>
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<td>☐ Middle Eastern</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Multiracial</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ White</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Other: <em>(Fill in the blank)</em></td>
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<td>6. Sexual Orientation:</td>
<td>☐ Heterosexual</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Homosexual</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Attracted to more than one gender (e.g., bisexual,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>pansexual, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Asexual</td>
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<td>7. Gender Identity:</td>
<td>☐ Agender</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Cisgender (identify with gender assigned at birth)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Gender fluid</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Trans nonbinary</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Trans man</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Trans woman</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Other: <em>(Fill in the blank)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Were you raised in a religion</td>
<td>☐ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or spiritual tradition?</td>
<td>☐ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <em>(If yes to Item 8)</em> How</td>
<td>☐ Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>would you describe that</td>
<td>☐ Christianity</td>
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<td>religion or spiritual tradition?</td>
<td>☐ Hinduism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Jainism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Judaism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Indigenous Religion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Islam</td>
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<td>☐ Paganism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Sikhism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Taoism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>☐ Zoroastrianism</td>
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<td>☐ Other: <em>(Fill in the blank)</em></td>
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<td>Item</td>
<td>Question</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td><em>(If yes to Item 8)</em> Was your religious or spiritual tradition part of a specific subgroup, branch, or denomination? (Examples: Buddhist - Shingon or Zen, Christianity - Catholic or Presbyterian, Indigenous Religion - Navajo or Maori, Islam - Shia or Sunni, Judaism - Conservative or Reform, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td><em>(If yes to Item 8)</em> How important was your religion or spirituality to your day-to-day life growing up?</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>Do you engage in a religious or spiritual tradition as an adult?</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td><em>(If yes to Item 12)</em> Are they the same as those with which you were raised?</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td><em>(If no to Item 13)</em> How would you describe your current religion or spiritual tradition?</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td><em>(If no to Item 13)</em> Is your religious or spiritual tradition part of a specific subgroup, branch, or denomination? (Examples: Buddhist - Shingon or Zen, Christianity - Catholic or Presbyterian, Indigenous Religion - Navajo or Maori, Islam - Shia or Sunni, Judaism - Conservative or Reform, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td><em>(If yes to Item 12)</em> How important is your religion or spirituality to your day-to-day life as an adult?</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>When you were growing up, did your religion or spiritual tradition express specific teachings or beliefs regarding sexual orientation and/or gender identity?</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td><em>(If yes to Item 17)</em> Were those beliefs positive or negative?</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td><em>(If yes to Item 17)</em> Do you feel those beliefs affected you growing up?</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td><em>(If yes to Item 19)</em> How do you feel those beliefs affected you growing up?</td>
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<td>21.</td>
<td><em>(If yes to Item 17)</em> Do you feel those beliefs affect you as an adult?</td>
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<td>22.</td>
<td><em>(If yes to Item 21)</em> How do you feel those beliefs affect you as an adult?</td>
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<td>23.</td>
<td>Have you ever experienced a religious belief, practice, structure, or event that negatively impacted you?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2 (continued)

24. *(If yes to Item 23)* In what context(s)?
- Religious building (Examples: church, mosque, synagogue, temple, etc.)
- Religious community
- Home/family
- Religious school
- Personal relationships
- Other: *(Fill in the blank)*

25. Have you ever considered doing something or tried to do something to change your sexual orientation or gender identity?
- Yes
- No

26. *(If yes to Item 25)* What did you think of doing or try to do to change your sexual orientation or gender identity?
- Prayer or religious ritual
- Behavioral changes
- Counseling
- Conversion therapy
- Other: *(Fill in the blank)*

27. *(If yes to Item 25)* Was it something you came to on your own, or was it someone else’s idea?
- My idea
- Parent’s/family’s idea
- Religious leader’s idea
- Other: *(Fill in the blank)*

28. A small number of participants will be selected to answer a short series of in-depth questions about how religion and spirituality have intersected with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity throughout their lives. Would you be willing to be contacted to take part in an interview?
- Yes
- No

29. *(If yes to Item 28)* Email Address: *(Fill in the blank)*

Quantitative Design

The survey protocol (see Table 3.1) collected a variety of data regarding the demographic information, sexual orientation, gender identity, details of participants’ religious upbringings, and ratings of beliefs regarding their experiences. Descriptive statistics were then utilized in order to organize and summarize the resulting data set. This allowed for some insight into the frequency with which LGBTQ+ individuals perceive their religions-of-origin as affirming versus disaffirming, whether they have chosen to remain within or leave their religion-of-origin as adults, and whether they perceive there to be any long-term effects of their religious upbringing and/or AREs experienced.

This survey utilized Likert scales in order to operationalize complex concepts such as affirming versus disaffirming religious environments, relative importance of religion in the lives
of participants, and perceived effects of their religious or spiritual backgrounds on their lives. A Likert scale consists of a series of statements that participants may choose from in order to rate their experiences in response to survey items (Vogt, 1999). This survey utilized 7-point linear response scales, which allows for a balance of sufficient points of discrimination without providing an overwhelming number of response options (Nunnally, 1978).

Qualitative Design

At the end of the initial survey, participants were asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed about experiences related to their religious upbringing. They were then able to indicate their interest by providing an email address. Of these volunteers, 12 were randomly selected and invited to participate in the interview process. These participants were presented with open-ended questions and encouraged to elaborate about their experiences. These additional questions gathered information regarding participants’ experiences of growing up in religious environments, as well as how they experience their upbringings as having affected them throughout their lives. This short series of open-ended questions provided a semi-structured framework while affording participants the freedom to share information most salient to their experiences.
Table 3.3

_Semi-Structured Interview Guide_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What was it like growing up with your religious/spiritual beliefs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>From a religious perspective, what were you taught about sexual orientation and/or gender identity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>During the survey, you mentioned that you had experienced a religious belief, practice, structure, or event that negatively impacted you—could you tell me more about that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How do you feel that affected you growing up?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Do you feel like it still impacts you as an adult?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>What was it that led you to stay in/leave your religion-of-origin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>How would you describe your religion or spirituality as an adult?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Have you tried any ways to get help or healing from negative experiences?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants who indicated consent to participate in the interviews were contacted regarding scheduling. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or telephone, depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes in order to facilitate analysis of the data provided. Before each interview, informed consent was reviewed and participants will be reminded that they could withdraw consent, terminate the interview, and/or withdraw their data from the study at any time.

Following data collection, this study utilized thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology in order to analyze, organize, and describe the qualitative data. Thematic analysis has been described as a valuable translator, enabling researchers to bridge the divide between qualitative and quantitative analysis and providing a method to summarize and describe the lived experiences of participants in a meaningful way (Boyatzis, 1998; Nowell et al., 2017; Sundler et al., 2019). As with any qualitative analysis, a methodical approach must be taken in order to produce meaningful, generalizable, and replicable results. Given the limited research
available in this area, an inductive approach was utilized in order to structure the qualitative analysis.

Based on the data collected, thematic categories were differentiated, compiled into thematic networks, and summarized over the course of six stages, as described by Attride-Stirling (2001). The initial phase involved working with the transcribed interview text, making note of particularly important or relevant passages. To facilitate this process, this researcher utilized the QualCoder, an open source computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program (Curtain, 2022). In addition to the basic research questions, close attention was paid to any salient or recurrent issues which became apparent. This allowed for the development of a specific coding framework based on the themes to be explored. Once the coding framework was solidified, it was utilized to break the text down into manageable segments. After the text was coded, themes were abstracted from these segments.

In the next stage of the analysis, these themes were refined into discrete categories that allowed for concise summarization of the concepts contained within the text. The themes identified were then assembled into groupings, or clusters, based on similarity of content. These gradually resulted in distinct “global themes,” which were in turn supported by the discrete “organizing” and “basic” themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Each thematic level was described and illustrated as a web-like network of non-hierarchical themes, which helped to condense complex concepts and summarize the data in a concise, easily accessible fashion.

The next phase involved description and exploration of the thematic network. Contents and underlying patterns were explored utilizing the guiding frame of the thematic network. After the network had been described and fully explored, Attride-Stirling (2001) calls for a summary of principal themes in a manner shaped explicitly for the intended audience. Finally, deductions
based on these thematic networks allow the researcher to address the original research questions while remaining grounded in the patterns which emerged from the interview transcripts.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter will discuss the demographic data of the samples for the quantitative and qualitative portions of this study in order to better understand the potential representativeness of the sample. The research questions will be briefly revisited as the relevant statistical analyses are explored. These questions will be reviewed and discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Quantitative Findings

As discussed in the previous chapter, at the time of this publication the sample size for this study ($N = 173$) allows for an overall confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of 7.5%. Statistical analyses were conducted using JASP (JASP Team, 2022).

Participant Characteristics

A total of 207 volunteers completed the survey. Thirty-two participants indicated that they were either not LGBTQ+ or were not raised in a religious or spiritual environment and were excluded from the analysis. Two additional respondents were excluded after taking the survey in bad faith. Participant age ranges were unevenly represented, with the 26–35-year-old subgroup dominating the sample.
The location distribution of participants consisted predominately of volunteers from the United States. Locations with less than five participants (The Bahamas, Belgium, Colombia, France, India, Italy, Philippines, and Tunisia) were combined into the “Other” category for analysis.

The volunteer sample was overwhelmingly white, with participants from other races/ethnicities poorly represented.
Figure 4.3

Races/Ethnicities of Participants

Note. This item allowed participants to select more than one race/ethnicity, resulting in a total greater than $N = 173$.

Sexual orientations of participants weighted heavily towards “attracted to more than one gender,” which appears to be consistent with recent percentage rankings reported elsewhere (see J. M. Jones, 2021).

Figure 4.4

Sexual Orientations of Participants
The majority of participants were cisgender, with the trans nonbinary category (including gender fluid and gender queer participants) making up nearly a quarter of the sample. Volunteers who listed a gender with less than five participants (agender, autigender, demi girl, and questioning) were combined into the “another” gender category for the analysis.

**Figure 4.5**

*Gender Identities of Participants*

The majority of participants described their religion-of-origin as one consistent with the broader category of Evangelical Protestant. Religions-of-origin with less than five participants were grouped into either the “Other (Christian)” (Adventist, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, multiple cross-category sects, Sedevacantist, Unitarian Universalist, or an unspecified denomination) or the “Other (Non-Christian)” (Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim) categories based on their characteristics.
Survey Results

The first research question of this study aimed to determine the frequency with which LGBTQ+ individuals are exposed to AREs. While the non-normal distribution of the survey sample’s demographic characteristics (e.g., age, location, race/ethnicity, etc.) made it impossible to demonstrate across-group differences, it is nevertheless possible to make some inferences based on the overall survey data. With no prior data regarding the proportion of LGBTQ+ individuals who grew up in religious or spiritual environments, a hypothesized proportion of 50% was used for the analysis. A binomial test revealed that the proportion of participants who suffered at least one ARE was significantly greater than chance (96%, \( p < .001 \)).

Table 4.1

Proportion of Participants Who Have Experienced AREs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Counts</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>VS-MPR</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adverse Religious Experience</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>2.83e+37</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>2.83e+37</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Proportions tested against value: 0.5.
The second research question aimed to determine the types of AREs that participants were exposed to, as well as the impacts of those AREs on their lives. On the survey, participants indicated that AREs occurred in a variety of contexts. Most fell within one of five categories, but 10 participants reported AREs which took place in other contexts. The nature and lifetime impacts of AREs was explored further in participant interviews, excerpts from which can be found in the Qualitative Results section of this chapter.

**Figure 4.7**

**ARE Contexts Reported by Participants**

Note. ARE subgroup: *n* = 166. This item allowed participants to select more than one ARE context, resulting in a total greater than *n* = 166.

The third research question asked whether participants felt as though they were more affected by disaffirming religious beliefs or doctrines during their upbringings or as adults (i.e., whether any effects dissipated over time) and whether negative or disaffirming religious beliefs or doctrines correlated with the level of impact reported by participants. One hundred fifty-five participants indicated that they felt they had been impacted by the LGBTQ+ beliefs espoused by their religion-of-origin as youths.
Participants Affected by LGBTQ+ Beliefs/Doctrines as Youths

This subgroup completed a linear response scale which ranged from 1 (affected very negatively) to 7 (affected very positively). The skewness of these results was found to be 1.96, indicating a positively skewed distribution of ratings; the kurtosis was found to be 5.05, indicating a leptokurtic distribution.

Impact of LGBTQ+ Beliefs/Doctrines as Youths

Note. Impacted as youths subgroup: $n = 155$.

One hundred thirty-two participants indicated that they felt they had been impacted by the LGBTQ+ beliefs espoused by their religion-of-origin as adults.
Participants Affected by LGBTQ+ Beliefs/Doctrines as Adults

This subgroup completed a linear response scale which ranged from 1 (affected very negatively) to 7 (affected very positively). The skewness of these results was found to be 1.33, indicating a positively skewed distribution of ratings; the kurtosis was found to be 2.63, indicating a more mesokurtic distribution than the previous scale.

Note. Impacted as adults subgroup: n = 132.

Since the number of participants who indicated that they were affected as adults was smaller than the number who indicated they were affected as youths, participants who were not members of
both subgroups were excluded listwise. A Wilcoxon’s signed-rank test showed that participants reported that they were significantly less negatively impacted by their religion-of-origins’ LGBTQ+ beliefs/doctrines as adults than as youths ($W = 327.50, p < .001$).

Table 4.2

*Impacts of LGBTQ+ Beliefs/Doctrines as Youths/Adults*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Impact as Youths</th>
<th>Impact as Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coefficient of Variation</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skewness</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Error of Skewness</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurtosis</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Error of Kurtosis</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapiro-Wilk</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-Value of Shapiro-Wilk</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3

*Comparison of LGBTQ+ Impacts as Youths/Adults*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure 1</th>
<th>Measure 2</th>
<th>$W$</th>
<th>$z$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>VS-MPR</th>
<th>Rank-Biserial Correlation</th>
<th>95% CI for Rank-Biserial Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact as Youths</td>
<td>Impact as Adults</td>
<td>329.00</td>
<td>-5.16</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>282362.36</td>
<td>-0.72</td>
<td>-0.83, -0.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $n = 132$. 
In order to explore whether there was a correlation between negative or disaffirming religious beliefs or doctrines and their perceived impact upon participants, participants were first asked whether their religion-of-origin espoused any beliefs or doctrines regarding LGBTQ+ people.

**Figure 4.13**

*Participants Whose Religions-of-Origin Expressed LGBTQ+ Beliefs/Doctrines*
This subgroup \((n = 161)\) was then asked to rate their religion-of-origins’ LGBTQ+ beliefs on a linear response scale ranging from 1 (very negative/disaffirming) to 7 (very positive/affirming). The skewness of these results was found to be 3.05, indicating a positively skewed distribution of ratings; the kurtosis was found to be 10.99, indicating a leptokurtic distribution of ratings.

**Figure 4.14**

*Types of LGBTQ+ Beliefs/Doctrines*

![Bar chart showing types of LGBTQ+ beliefs](chart.png)

*Note.* LGBTQ+ beliefs subgroup: \(n = 161\).

In order to assess whether the type of LGBTQ+ belief expressed was correlated with participants’ ratings of impact as youths and adults, a Kendall’s tau-b test was utilized. Due to the different sizes for each subgroup, cases were excluded on a pairwise basis. Based on the results of this analysis, participants’ impact ratings for both youth and adulthood were strongly correlated with their rankings of their religions-of-origins’ LGBTQ+ beliefs \((n = 155, \tau_b = 0.48, p < .001\) and \(n = 132, \tau_b = 0.33, p < .001\), respectively). Additionally, negative youth impact ratings showed a strong correlation with negative adult impact ratings \((n = 130, \tau_b = 0.47, p < .001)\).
Table 4.4

Correlations Between LGBTQ+ Beliefs/Doctrines and Impact as Youths/Adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Type of Beliefs</th>
<th>Impact as Youths</th>
<th>Impact as Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Beliefs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kendall’s Tau-B</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p-Value</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VS-MPR</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper 95% CI</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower 95% CI</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact as Youths</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kendall’s Tau-B</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p-Value</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VS-MPR</td>
<td>2.77e+8</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper 95% CI</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower 95% CI</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact as Adults</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kendall’s Tau-B</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p-Value</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VS-MPR</td>
<td>1696.17</td>
<td>2.56e+7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper 95% CI</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower 95% CI</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Cases excluded pairwise.

The fourth research question investigated the frequency with which participants considered or underwent sexual orientation or gender identity change efforts and the initiator of said efforts. Participants were first asked whether they had ever contemplated or engaged in any change efforts.
A hypothesized proportion of 50% was used for a binomial test. This revealed that the proportion of participants who considered or engaged in at least one change effort was not significantly greater than chance (51%, \( p = 0.76 \)).

### Table 4.5

**Proportion of Participants Who Considered or Engaged in Change Effort**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Counts</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>VS-MPR</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change Effort</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Proportions tested against value: 0.5.

On the survey, participants indicated that they engaged in a variety of change efforts. Most fell within one of four categories, but 10 participants reported other types of change efforts.
#### Figure 4.16

*Types of Change Efforts*

![Bar chart showing types of change efforts: Behavioral Change, Conversion Therapy, Counseling, Prayer/Religious Ritual, Other Change Effort.](chart)

*Note.* Change efforts subgroup: \( n = 89 \). This item allowed participants to select more than one change effort, resulting in a total greater than \( n = 89 \).

In order to determine who initiated these sexual orientation or gender identity change efforts, participants who indicated that they had considered or engaged in at least one change effort (\( n = 89 \)) were asked whether they had engaged in various different types of change efforts. The majority of these efforts could be categorized within one of three general types, but seven participants indicated that their change efforts were initiated by another individual or group. Of this subgroup, 76.40% indicated that their change efforts were at least partially self-initiated.
Initiators of Participants’ Change Efforts

Note. Change efforts subgroup: $n = 89$. This item allowed participants to select more than one initiator of their change effort(s), resulting in a total greater than $n = 89$.

The fifth and final research question asked whether participants have remained within their religion-of-origin or participate in any religious or spiritual traditions as adults and whether the importance of religion/spirituality has changed for participants over time. All participants were asked to rate the importance of religion or spirituality to their everyday lives as youths on a scale from 1 (not very important) to 7 (very important). The skewness of these results was found to be -1.35, indicating a negatively skewed distribution of ratings; kurtosis was found to be 2.80, indicating a relatively mesokurtic distribution.
In order to assess whether the importance of religion/spirituality to participants changed throughout their lives, participants were first asked whether they currently engaged in religious or spiritual practice.

**Figure 4.19**

*Participants Currently Engaged in Religious/Spiritual Practice*

Note. Currently religious/spiritual subgroup: \( n = 60 \).

The 60 participants who indicated that they currently engage in religious or spiritual practice were subsequently asked whether they remain within their religion-of-origin or converted to
another religion or spiritual tradition. Of these participants, only 14 have chosen to remain within
their religion-of-origin, or 8.09% of the total sample \( N = 173 \).

**Figure 4.20**

*Participants Who Remained in Religion-of-Origin*

![Pie chart showing percentages of participants who remained in their religion-of-origin.]

*Note.* Currently religious/spiritual subgroup: \( n = 60 \).

Participants who indicated that they were currently religious or spiritual were asked to rate the
importance of religion or spirituality to their everyday lives as adults on a scale from 1 (not very
important) to 7 (very important). The skewness of these results was found to be -0.71, indicating
a negatively skewed distribution of ratings; kurtosis was found to be -0.33, indicating a
platykurtic distribution.
Figure 4.21

Importance of Religion/Spirituality as Adults

Note. Currently religious/spiritual subgroup: \( n = 60 \).

Since the number of participants who indicated that they were currently religious or spiritual was smaller than the total sample, participants who were not members of both groups were excluded listwise. Results of a Wilcoxon’s signed-rank test showed that participants rated religion/spirituality as much less important in their everyday lives than it had been when they were youths \( (W = 810.00, \ p < .001) \).

Table 4.6

Importance of Religion/Spirituality as Youths/Adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Importance as Youths</th>
<th>Importance as Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coefficient of Variation</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skewness</td>
<td>-1.35</td>
<td>-0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Error of Skewness</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurtosis</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Error of Kurtosis</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapiro-Wilk</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( p )-Value of Shapiro-Wilk</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.7

Change in Importance of Religion/Spirituality as Youths/Adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure 1</th>
<th>Measure 2</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>z</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>VS-MPR</th>
<th>Rank-Biserial Correlation</th>
<th>95% CI for Rank-Biserial Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact as Youths</td>
<td>Impact as Adults</td>
<td>810.00</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>223.47</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.39 - 0.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 60 for this analysis.*

Figure 4.22

Comparison of Religion/Spirituality as Youths/Adults

*Note. n = 60.*

Qualitative Findings

Participant Characteristics

Twelve volunteers participated in the interviews included in this study. For purposes of discussion, they will be identified by the following pseudonyms: Alana, Bryce, Devon, Eliza, Farren, Heath, Morgan, Oliver, Quinn, Shannon, Tara, and Valerie. Demographic information for each participant can be found in Table 4.8.
Table 4.8  

Demographic Information of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Loc.</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Religion of Origin</th>
<th>Current Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alana</td>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Black; Hispanic or Latino; Multiracial; White</td>
<td>Attracted to more than one gender</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>Christianity (Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryce</td>
<td>56–65</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>Christianity (Roman Catholic)</td>
<td>Christianity (Mainline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>18–25</td>
<td>GBR</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Attracted to more than one gender</td>
<td>Trans nonbinary</td>
<td>Christianity (Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>Paganism/agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>Christianity (Mainline Protestant)</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farren</td>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Attracted to more than one gender</td>
<td>Trans nonbinary</td>
<td>Christianity (Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>Paganism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heath</td>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Attracted to more than one gender</td>
<td>Trans man</td>
<td>Christianity (Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>Paganism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>Christianity (Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>Seeking/Paganism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>AUS</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Attracted to more than one gender</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>Christianity (Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinn</td>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Attracted to more than one gender</td>
<td>Trans nonbinary</td>
<td>Unitarian Universalist</td>
<td>Christianity (Mainline Protestant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>36–45</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>Christianity (Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>Agnostic or atheist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>36–45</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Asian; Hispanic or Latino; Multiracial</td>
<td>Attracted to more than one gender</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>Christianity (Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>Judaism/agnostic or atheist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>GBR</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Attracted to more than one gender</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>Christianity (Evangelical Protestant)</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thematic Network Analysis

As described in the previous chapter, participant interviews were analyzed using thematic network analysis, as delineated by Attride-Stirling (2001). Initial coding of each interview
allowed for the derivation of a number of basic themes from the text. From these basic themes, broader organizing themes were developed. Organizing themes led to the identification of several global themes, which facilitated description of the overall data. Thematic analysis of the interviews yielded a robust array of themes which were identified, described, and sorted into thematic networks as described in the previous chapter. For the sake of feasibility, only codes that were present for at least three of the participants were incorporated into basic, organizing, and global themes, though more nuanced analyses may be conducted using this data in future research. The resulting network is composed of 30 basic themes, 18 organizing themes, and seven global themes as delineated by Attride-Stirling (2001). These themes are summarized in Tables 4.9 and 4.10. A visual summary of the thematic network is presented in Figure 4.23.

**Table 4.9**

*Development of Basic Themes From Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Topics Discussed</th>
<th>Basic Themes Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Anxiety</td>
<td>• anxiety, fear, and dread growing up</td>
<td>1. Persistent anxiety, fear, and dread,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dread</td>
<td>• anxiety, fear, and dread in adulthood sometimes continuing into adulthood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fear</td>
<td>• pervasive external stressors</td>
<td>2. Guilt, fear of judgment, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Isolation</td>
<td>• fear of judgment from others</td>
<td>pressure to conform contributed to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Guilt</td>
<td>• fear of eternal judgment</td>
<td>pervasive stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loneliness</td>
<td>• guilt re: sexuality/gender identity</td>
<td>3. Senses of loneliness and isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pressure to Conform</td>
<td>• senses of loneliness &amp; isolation</td>
<td>are common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Stress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Army/Militia</td>
<td>• discouragement of questions</td>
<td>4. Questions, as well as the use of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Authority</td>
<td>• discouragement of reason &amp; critical thinking, were</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Censorship</td>
<td>thinking</td>
<td>discouraged in favor of reliance on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Conspiracy Theories</td>
<td>• emphasis on faith/belief over reason belief, and the teachings of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.9 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Topics Discussed</th>
<th>Basic Themes Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Control</td>
<td>• focus on teachings of leaders</td>
<td>religious group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Critical Thinking</td>
<td>• limited educational options</td>
<td>5. Limited educational options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Disinformation</td>
<td>• emphasis on rules</td>
<td>available to contrast the teachings of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dissent</td>
<td>• prevalence of conspiracy theories &amp;</td>
<td>the religious group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Education</td>
<td>disinfection</td>
<td>6. Limited meaningful contact with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Expulsion</td>
<td>• suppression of dissent</td>
<td>people outside of religious groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Faith/Belief</td>
<td>• religious, social, &amp; community</td>
<td>7. Rules, hierarchy, obedience, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gender Roles</td>
<td>sanctions (e.g., ostracization,</td>
<td>conformity to prescripted roles were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Guns</td>
<td>expulsion, shaming, etc.)</td>
<td>emphasized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hierarchy</td>
<td>• limits on outside information</td>
<td>8. Failure to conform or suppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Information</td>
<td>• limited meaningful contact with</td>
<td>of dissent resulted in religious, social,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Isolation</td>
<td>outsiders</td>
<td>&amp; community sanctions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Leaders</td>
<td>• strict hierarchical structures</td>
<td>9. Some groups emphasized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Obedience</td>
<td>• strict gender roles</td>
<td>opposition to outside authority,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ostracization</td>
<td>• pressure to conform</td>
<td>manifesting in belief in conspiracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Preaching/Teaching</td>
<td>• opposition to outside authority</td>
<td>theories, mistrust of the government,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pressure to Conform</td>
<td></td>
<td>and emphasis on self-defense (e.g.,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Questions</td>
<td></td>
<td>support of militias, stockpiling guns,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reason</td>
<td></td>
<td>etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Respect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Rules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Shame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Shoulds &amp; Shouldn’ts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Apocalypse/End Times</td>
<td>• emphasis on literal, fundamentalist</td>
<td>10. Emphasis on literal, interpretation of scriptural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Biblical marriage</td>
<td>interpretation of scripture</td>
<td>fundamentalist interpretations of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.9 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Topics Discussed</th>
<th>Basic Themes Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Choice</td>
<td>• framing of sexual orientation/gender scripture alongside additional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Conversion Efforts</td>
<td>identity as a choice</td>
<td>teachings from leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Cross-Dressing</td>
<td>• framing of LGBTQ+ as</td>
<td>11. Sexual orientation and gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Drag</td>
<td>persion/sin</td>
<td>12. Groups emphasized the afterlife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Damnation</td>
<td>• separation from “worldly”</td>
<td>13. Groups emphasized the existence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Doctrine</td>
<td>influences</td>
<td>14. Groups emphasized purity and disavowal of lust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Eternity</td>
<td>• conversion efforts/techniques</td>
<td>15. Conversion efforts or accepting punishment were considered best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Evangelism</td>
<td>• definition of love</td>
<td>practices for LGBTQ+ group members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Exorcism</td>
<td>• purity culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Faith/Belief</td>
<td>• emphasis on End Times/afterlife</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Free Will</td>
<td>• Evangelism &amp; judgment of others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fundamentalism</td>
<td>• definition of marriage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- God</td>
<td>• eternal judgment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Godliness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hell</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Holiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Judgment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- LGBTQ+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Love</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Nature</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Perversion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Preaching/Teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.9 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Topics Discussed</th>
<th>Basic Themes Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Purity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The Rapture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Righteousness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Suicide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Worldliness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Censorship</td>
<td>• lack of information/disinformation</td>
<td>16. Struggles with confidence and identity development after growing up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Confidence</td>
<td>about LGBTQ+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Disinformation</td>
<td>• fear of judgment from community</td>
<td>with limited or false information re:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Education</td>
<td>• fear of engagement with LGBTQ+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Evangelism</td>
<td>peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Experimentation</td>
<td>• isolation from LGTBQ+ peers</td>
<td>17. Guilt re: past interactions with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fear</td>
<td>• lack of friendships outside of group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Friendship</td>
<td>• negative interactions with outsiders</td>
<td>18. Challenges of growing up without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Guilt</td>
<td>• guilt re: previous interactions with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hate</td>
<td>LGBTQ+ people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identity</td>
<td>• lack of confidence entering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Information</td>
<td>LGBTQ+ community/romantic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Isolation</td>
<td>relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Judgment</td>
<td>• sense of loneliness &amp; isolation from</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loneliness</td>
<td>LGBTQ+ community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Love</td>
<td>• gradual/delayed development of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lust</td>
<td>LGBTQ+ identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Peer Interactions</td>
<td>• sexual experimentation (i.e.,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4.9 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Topics Discussed</th>
<th>Basic Themes Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Romantic Relationships</td>
<td>extensive, delayed, etc.)</td>
<td>relationships as adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- AREs</td>
<td>• disaffirming teachings/doctrine</td>
<td>22. A variety of adverse experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Current impacts</td>
<td>• graphic descriptions or portrayals of</td>
<td>occur, most commonly re:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Emotional/Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>death, torture, or eternal judgment</td>
<td>disaffirming religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Physical Abuse</td>
<td>• discussions of punishments for</td>
<td>teachings/doctrine, threats of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>LGBTQ+ people (e.g., being fired,</td>
<td>punishment or judgment, and negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>stonings, beatings, death, etc.)</td>
<td>interactions with anti-LGBTQ+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• observations of or direct</td>
<td>members of religious communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>confrontation with anti-LGBTQ+</td>
<td>23. Experiences of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>group members or leaders</td>
<td>emotional/psychological, physical, or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• instances of</td>
<td>sexual abuse in religious contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>emotional/psychological, physical, or</td>
<td>and/or involving members of their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sexual abuse</td>
<td>religious community also occur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ongoing impacts these experiences</td>
<td>24. Sequelae may persist into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• current sequelae</td>
<td>adulthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Grief</td>
<td>• decisions to leave religion or convert</td>
<td>25. The decision to convert to a new religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Leaving Religion</td>
<td>to new religion</td>
<td>or leave religion altogether is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loss of Career</td>
<td>• subsequent losses</td>
<td>difficult and complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loss of Community</td>
<td>• the grieving process</td>
<td>26. Losses frequently occur following</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loss of Faith/Belief</td>
<td></td>
<td>departure from the religion of origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loss of Family</td>
<td></td>
<td>27. Such losses involve substantial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loss of Marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td>mourning and adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loss of Support Systems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Mourning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 4.9** (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Topics Discussed</th>
<th>Basic Themes Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Religious Conversion</td>
<td></td>
<td>28. Therapy has been a valuable tool re: healing from negative religious experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Chosen Family</td>
<td>• efforts to heal from past experiences</td>
<td>29. For those who convert to another religion, spirituality form a strong support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Current Religion/Spirituality</td>
<td>• current role of religion/spirituality</td>
<td>30. New communities/chosen families can become powerful support systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- New Communities</td>
<td>• development of new communities, families, &amp; support systems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- New Support Systems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Therapy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.10**

*Development of the Thematic Network*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
<th>Organizing Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Persistent anxiety, fear, and dread, sometimes continuing into adulthood</td>
<td>Negative internal experiences</td>
<td>Psychological impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Guilt, fear of judgment, and pressure to conform contributed to pervasive stress</td>
<td>Loneliness and isolation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Senses of loneliness and isolation are common</td>
<td>Loneliness and isolation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Questions, as well as the use of reason and critical thinking, were discouraged in favor of reliance on faith, belief, and the teachings of the religious group</td>
<td>Control of information</td>
<td>Authoritarian environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Themes</td>
<td>Organizing Themes</td>
<td>Global Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Avoidance of topic or disinformation re: LGBTQ+ people</td>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Limited educational options available to contrast the teachings of the religious group</td>
<td>Isolation/“us versus them” mentality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Limited meaningful contact with people outside of religious groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Some groups emphasized opposition to outside authority/outside groups, manifesting in belief in conspiracy theories, mistrust of the government, and emphasis on self-defense (e.g., support of militias, stockpiling guns, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Emphasis on righteousness/holiness of in-group and corruption/worldliness of out-group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Rules, hierarchy, obedience, and conformity to prescribed roles were emphasized</td>
<td>Authority &amp; Hierarchy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Failure to conform or suppression of dissent resulted in religious, social, &amp; community sanctions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Emphasis on literal, fundamentalist interpretations of Defining LGBTQ+ people</td>
<td>Disaffirming religious doctrine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.10 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
<th>Organizing Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>scripture alongside additional teachings from leadership</td>
<td>Defining LGBTQ+ people (continued)</td>
<td>Disaffirming religious doctrine (continued)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Sexual orientation and gender identity were framed as a matter of choice between righteousness and sin, lust, or perversion</td>
<td>Purity versus lust/perversion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Groups emphasized purity and disavowal of lust/perversion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Conversion efforts or accepting punishment were considered best practices for LGBTQ+ group members</td>
<td>Hell and punishment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Groups emphasized the afterlife and the apocalypse, especially the separation of the righteous from sinners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Groups emphasized the existence of a physical Hell</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Struggles with confidence after growing up with limited or false information re: LGBTQ+ people</td>
<td>LGBTQ+ identity development</td>
<td>Social impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Struggles with loneliness, isolation, and difficulty with integration into the LGBTQ+ community as adults</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 4.10 (continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
<th>Organizing Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20. Difficulties with or delays in</td>
<td>LGBTQ+ identity development (continued)</td>
<td>Social impacts (continued)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identity development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Guilt re: past interactions with LGBTQ+ peers outside of their religious community during which they were hurtful or rude</td>
<td>Peer interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Challenges of growing up without friendships outside of the religious group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Difficulties navigating romantic relationships as adults</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. A variety of adverse experiences occur, most commonly re: disaffirming religious teachings/doctrine, threats of punishment or judgment, and negative interactions with anti-LGBTQ+ members of religious communities</td>
<td>AREs</td>
<td>ARE impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Experiences of emotional/psychological, physical, or sexual abuse in religious contexts and/or involving members of their religious community also occur</td>
<td>Experiences of abuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Sequelae may persist into adulthood</td>
<td>Sequelae of AREs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.10 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
<th>Organizing Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27. The decision to convert to a new religion or leave religion altogether is</td>
<td>Religious conversion</td>
<td>Change and loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Losses frequently occur following departure from the religion of origin</td>
<td>Loss and mourning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Such losses involve substantial mourning and adjustment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Therapy and other professional mental health services have been valuable</td>
<td>Mental health treatment</td>
<td>Healing</td>
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<td>re: healing from negative religious experiences</td>
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<td>31. For those who convert to another religion, spirituality form a strong</td>
<td>Spiritual resources</td>
<td></td>
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<td>support</td>
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<td>32. New communities and families of choice can become powerful support systems</td>
<td>Community building</td>
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Figure 4.23

Visualization of the Thematic Network
Negative Internal Experiences

References to negative internal experiences such as anxiety, fear, guilt, sadness, or self-hatred were present in the majority of participant interviews. These were most frequently related to internalized beliefs related to their sexual orientations or gender identities, authoritarian environments, or AREs. For several participants, these negative internal experiences have proved resistant to mental health treatment and continue to impact them as adults. As Morgan reflected: “There was a lot of guilt. A lot of shame... I’m still working with a lot of internalized guilt and shame over things that are not inherently wrong or sinful.”

Other participants were denied adequate mental health treatment—and occasionally physical healthcare—due to the beliefs espoused by their families and communities. Heath’s narrative offers a particularly vivid example:

My mental health issues did not get addressed at all because we didn’t believe that they existed and/or just believed that, you know, that psychiatry was of the devil and stuff like that. The medical issues were—and sometimes mental health issues would get thrown into this, which is why I bring them up together—but the physical issues were very frequently understood as judgments from God or God teaching you something. And if you just learned whatever the lesson was, then the physical problem would go away. Where it was trying to be less blame-y, but then it became blame-y because if it stuck around, it meant you weren’t learning the goddamn lesson, right? So that was, you know, a horrible thing to stick on a kid. On anybody, but, you know, Jesus Christ—I was like 13. It created an incredible amount of self-loathing and self-distrust, because I think I’m fine, but everyone is telling me that there’s something horrifically wrong with me. That
it’s so wrong that God has to put me through this awful thing in order to fix it, and I can’t even figure out what it is that’s wrong.

As in this example, many participants grew up in environments saturated with the idea that if they were able to abide by the tenets of their religion well enough or exhibit sufficient faith, they would be healed of their mental or physical ailments. Often, this extended to sexual orientation and/or gender identity, which were viewed as unacceptable lifestyle choices in all but one of the participants’ religions of origin.

**Loneliness and Isolation**

Participants’ discussed various ways in which they felt lonely and isolated, both within their families or religious communities and from those outside. Shannon described a “suffocating” childhood environment, which, at the time, she regarded as normal. Farren noted that their difficulty conforming with gender expectations and the discouragement of questions “made [them] feel like an outsider” within a tight-knit religious community. Some participants made efforts to alleviate this sense of loneliness and isolation by participating in activities or behaviors in order to camouflage themselves in order to be accepted by their communities. As Eliza stated:

I knew I was gay at like 11 or 12. Like knew knew. So I couldn’t tell anybody because I felt so gross about it and I felt like it was wrong and that my parents would disown me and hate me. So I dated guys at the church, maybe did things I otherwise wouldn’t have done just because I wanted to fit in. Whether it was sexual experiences or having dates with guys and trying to be the poster child for my parents.

These efforts to blend in with their peers often served only to increase participants’ senses of loneliness, stress, and anxiety. Devon noted that “everything [I] doing just wound up
Farren described the senses of loneliness, isolation, and feeling under threat that they experienced:

When I got older and had, like, a more formed idea of what it meant to be gay or bisexual, like I am, that was when I started to be more conscious about what I was saying and how dangerous it would be for me to talk about the wrong thing with the wrong person. Like, there was no one I could talk to about it until I got older and left [their private religious school] and made some new friends in public school. It was still, like, the old dial-up days of the internet and I wasn’t tech-savvy enough to know how to find a community online like you can get now.

**Control of Information**

Participants discussed the control of information within their families and religious communities in three distinct ways: limiting access to outside information, providing disinformation to community members, and discouragement of critical thinking. Limited access to outside information was noted by most participants as a significant reason for their lack of adequate knowledge or understanding of LGBTQ+ topics as teens or young adults. Access to outside information was discouraged through the use of several means (e.g., instruction to avoid certain sources/media, demonization of non-religious media, removing or banning media from libraries, encouragement of private religious or home schooling, lack of sexual health education, etc.). Farren described the limitations of their private school library in detail:

The school library would only ever carry, like, “approved” books. I remember they pulled the *Lord of the Rings* books at some point because they had magic in them. *Star Wars* was out because it “promoted Eastern philosophy.” And *Harry Potter* was like, directly
from Satan cuz it would encourage kids to get into witchcraft. But then at the same time they had books that were, like, way too adult in some ways. I remember checking out this book that was basically a romance novel with some really problematic stuff about ancient Rome and the relationship between a slave and her master and all this torture and violence, but that was somehow okay because it was by a Christian author and the characters were Christian. Or they became Christians as it went along. And it was totally fine for us to be reading these book series about, like, demon possession and the horrible things that are gonna happen to those left behind during the Tribulation. Like, how was that okay? I guess if it matched up with their beliefs and what they wanted us to think then it was fine.

In some cases, private religious schools did introduce some information regarding LGBTQ+ topics, but these efforts were, at best, limited in their scope and detail. When discussing lay (i.e., non-clergy) teachers’ attempts to introduce these topics, Bryce noted that they were “restricted in how far they could go with their curriculum and what they could talk about” with students. Devon expressed concern regarding the recent trend towards library and school censorship in the United States reported in the news: “It’s like, even in the public schools in the States now, isn’t it? It’s really scary to see people banning books. I expect that from a religious school maybe, but it feels like they’re taking it further.”

Disinformation, while less prevalent than restricted access to information, nevertheless had a profound impact on some participants. Some disinformation surrounded general sexual health topics and reflected an emphasis on purity and abstinence within religious communities. For example, Devon noted that:
Everything they taught us about sex in school was a joke. Condoms are only 50% effective, IUDs will go into your uterus and make you infertile half the time, a girl sitting fully clothed on a boy’s lap would be enough to get her pregnant, on and on—it was mad... And I wasn’t getting any real information at home either. I pretty much had to teach myself and try to figure things out as I went along. Which can put you in quite a dangerous place when you’re going out into the world with no preparation whatsoever.

On the rare occasion LGBTQ+ sexual health topics were raised with participants, they were presented as warnings or cautionary tales. “I’ll never forget being told at school that like, being gay caused like actual physical harm. Like it would damage your body if you had gay sex,” Farren recalled. “They talked about deformities and STDs and all these horrible things.” Farren also noted, “They only ever talked about men when it came to homosexuality in school. Anytime it came up, it was very focused on anal sex and how perverted it was; [it was] just all about lust and perverted, predatory men.”

The question of critical thinking and the application of reason was a point of discussion for nearly all participants. Participants described numerous ways through which questions and alternative viewpoints were discouraged. Farren commented on the types of questions which were acceptable in their environment:

If you wanted to know how old Methuselah was or what order the plagues came in, that was fine. But if you asked like...If you asked like “How could all those animals fit on the ark” or “Where did Cain and Abel find wives” or, like, “Why does the Bible say this in one place and this in another,” that was something that would get you glared at. Like, “What is this little heathen child asking me these questions?” You didn’t feel like you could ask questions without consequences or step out of line. And, like, the just shocked
look that people gave you if you said the wrong thing or asked the wrong question still sticks with me. Like, “What’s wrong with you?”

Farren also referred to the commonly employed tactic of framing faith or belief as opposed to logic and reason: “Questions were always so discouraged and put down when I would ask them growing up. I couldn’t use logic at all without being, like, accused of not having enough faith or being disrespectful or whatever.” This tactic serves to discourage community members from placing their trust in secular or scientific outside sources of information while simultaneously discouraging dissent. Morgan echoed Farren’s perspective: “My ability to reason and develop my own personal beliefs within a religious context were severely hindered by that because to ask the questions was so discouraged.”

Participants also expressed that they believe their lives may have been different had they had greater access to accurate information. The majority of participants fall between the ages of 26 and 35, and as a result they have seen incredible advances to the availability and prevalence of the internet over the course of their lives. Tara reflected on the differences between current youths and previous generations:

I think about a lot of the kids that have access to internet discourse that we didn’t have in high school. So, that’s been some twenty years ago, and feminist and transgender rights and awareness of all of these things have come a long way since even the early 2000s. Despite wishing for greater access to information in the past, Tara mused, “I don’t hate my younger self, I’m just like... ugh, ignorance is not bliss.”

**Isolation or “Us Versus Them” Mentality**

In addition to the inner sense of loneliness and isolation that participants discussed, they also shared numerous examples of the ways in which their communities distanced themselves
from outsiders. This often led to environments in which participants and their families were surrounded only by social contacts from their religious communities with the exception of the workplace and, for some participants, their enrollment in public schools. The church and religious community made up the entirety of Eliza’s family’s social group:

That’s the only friends they had. They had what was called a S.A.L.T. [Serving And Living Together] group where they met once a week and they came to our house. And [Eliza’s parents] were best friends with the pastor... And to this day, my parents—their only friends are church people. And I will never understand that. From the church. And I’m like, “How can you have any opposing views, or how can you have a conversation about spirituality and about God with somebody who literally they say the same things and they walk the same line and... I get you wanna have people around you with value, but, at the same time, isn’t the point to discuss it? To go through it and for it to be okay to doubt things?”

Devon’s family, too, spent most of their time with other members of their religious community: “My parents didn’t really associate with anyone outside of it, like, they knew some people from work, but they weren’t really friends like.”

Some participants discussed more explicit efforts from their communities to discourage members from forming outside relationships. The fostering of this “us versus them” dichotomy surfaced in a number of ways for participants. Devon described a strong emphasis on the separation between “God-fearing, righteous people” and the secular world of:

worldly people, people who aren’t Christian, who aren’t living in God’s light and are led by the devil. The phrase “in the world, but not of it” got thrown around a lot as a justification for why we were supposed to fellowship with other Christians and keep
everyone else at a distance so they can’t lead us astray. Because that’s worldly, that’s of the devil, and if you let your guard down you’ll be vulnerable to evil.

This distinction between people within and outside of faith communities was a common theme among the participants from Evangelical Protestant upbringings. Farren expressed discomfort with the ways in which the struggle of good versus evil—or the righteous versus non-believers—was framed:

Sometimes it felt like they were building a little army... I remember this one song, “Father Abraham.” There were, like, motions and we’d all sing along and do, like, a marching thing. All marching in step with each other. And there’s one that was, like, about being in “The Lord’s Army,” that also had motions and stuff. But that one also talked about actual military stuff, which now I feel was kind of creepy. Like people were always talking about spiritual warfare and victory over evil and fighting for the Lord. In a very literal sense.

This metaphorical mobilization at times extended into political activism. Heath reflected upon his time spent working to advance policies rooted in religious belief:

I got pulled into a lot of political stuff in my teens. Working campaigns and stuff like that and, you know, I campaigned for state amendments to make marriage only between a man and a woman and those types of things...The goal was theocracy, end of story.

Heath’s narrative also provided a clear example of the way in which isolation from outside groups and seemingly figurative language related to concepts of spiritual warfare can make its transition into actual behavior:

These [religious groups] were incredibly niche groups of people, right? Like, really niche and cut off from the rest of culture. People didn’t know these people existed
because we made sure nobody knew we existed. We were very low profile, there’s no, you know, you can’t go and find a name of a cult hanging on some compound somewhere, right? Like, we were the most white picket fence, suburbanite version of crazy gun stockpiling extremists that you can imagine.

In his narrative, Heath wished to make clear that these extremist, fundamentalist perspectives can be particularly damaging for LGBTQ+ individuals, who are frequently the target for AREs, anti-LGBTQ+ policies, and other attacks:

Unfortunately, a great portion of American Christianity is extremist, regardless of how nice it looks on its face. By its actual definition, it requires that absolutely nobody else is right. Which does mean that absolutely everybody else is wrong... and everybody else’s way of life is wrong... That perspective is what makes Christianity so dangerous within American culture and makes it so destructive in queer culture. Because there’s no place where we can just be. We always have to be completely wrong and we just happen to be a place where that’s extremely clearly delineated. Where most people have some things that they do that Christianity is okay with and something that they do that Christianity isn’t, queer people are, by definition, just 100% wrong no matter what we do... That’s why we are this battleground place for this extremist viewpoint.

While this may seem to be an extreme case, it can be viewed as an extension of the same “us versus them” mentality encouraged by many authoritarian religious groups. Heath’s narrative also criticized more mainstream churches which often harbor similar beliefs beneath the surface:

You can go to a really hip, cool megachurch that everybody’s like, “Oh, everybody’s so welcome here, right?” And you look at their actual theology, and if you go and talk to
the actual pastors, you become a person who’s really involved with that church, it’s just as extremist. It’s just not as loud about it. It's a little toned down.

Devon also expressed strong feelings regarding the extent to which even apparently mainstream religious groups may become increasingly isolationist and extremist:

People would just keep getting more and more distant from the rest of the world—and this was right in the middle of the city! People walking around like they were in hostile territory outside of home or church and it was just scary to see. My parents and their friends, the whole church, they would, like, only spend time together. They’d discuss politics and, like, the state of the world and the way they would talk about things would just recycle and get more and more polarized cuz, like, when you’re only hearing the same opinions and the same beliefs over and over, that makes it really easy for them to get stronger. It filters out everything else and all you’re left with is this, like, basically twisted view of the world where everyone else is evil or being led astray... The focus on, like, the end of the world and bringing about the second coming of Christ was always very scary to me. Like, I’m a kid and I don’t want the world to end! But you’re just taught from a young age that this world is sinful and evil and it’s really for the best that it’s destroyed and we can all go to heaven. Like, standing outside of it now, I feel like, “Oh my God, I was in this, like, apocalyptic death cult.” Like, one thing—we would always donate money to missionaries and to Jews in other countries to return to Israel which, like, seems okay on the surface, but what we were really doing is trying to bring on the second coming. Cuz they would say, “Oh, it won’t happen until all the Jews return to the Holy Land or until everyone on earth has heard about Christ.” So it wasn’t really about saving people or helping people, it was about making the conditions right for the
Rapture to happen and for all this to start... And people were getting just so scared of the world that they would talk about trying to find ways to get guns—cuz it’s more difficult here—and trying to find loopholes and places where they could get weapons just in case something happens. And they vote for the worst people because they feel like they believe some of the same things: They’re against trans rights or whatever. They vote against their own interests as, like, poor, working people because their religious views tell them they that have to.

Authority and Hierarchy

Participants described religious upbringings characterized by hierarchical, authoritarian structures. Morgan detailed a strict, rule-oriented atmosphere: “Pretty much every aspect of life was ruled by should or shouldn’ts...[it was] just kind of very cult mentality, very ‘this is what the pastor says, and this is what it is.’” This system created an environment in which young people were expected to adhere to prescribed behavior or risk the disapproval of their families and religious communities. Morgan reflected, “my main preoccupation was with being good. Being obedient, because that’s what I felt my sense of worth was tied to.” Similarly, Heath explained:

It was a lot about conformity and control more than it was about, you know, actual faith, I think. We used those words, but to use those words to describe the experience is, you know, really an incorrect representation of what we were doing. But, of course, using those words was, you know, an excellent manipulation tactic, right? So, you know, using “Well, God wants you to do this” was frankly, very blatantly, just a way of getting everybody to do the, you know, the desired outcome.
Strict behavioral mandates and rigid adherence to hierarchy was even more apparent with regards to gender roles and gender expression throughout participant narratives. Morgan provided this example:

You have no other worth than supporting the men in your life. Whether it’s your dad if you’re single, or your husband if you’re married...Your worth is always tied with your relationship with a man, and you are never to have too much power or authority within the church because that’s just not the way things are done according to Paul...The number one value that was instilled was... be obedient and respectful to authority. With God being the ultimate authority, and your parents being the very next step underneath of that, and then the church. And as a woman, also, eventually, a husband. So there was a lot of... it was a very authoritarian upbringing.

Heath, too, described “extremely stringent” gender expectations:

I was very unequivocally told that I was, as a theoretical girl, that I was, you know, I existed to get married and have kids and run a household. That was an absolute expectation... I was, you know, absolutely not supposed to interact with anything that was supposed to be for boys.

Alana also shared her struggles with strict gender guidelines:

Tensions, between roles of women and roles of girls, and gender performance and what the faith dictated there, but also kinda just the constant pull back and forth between, like, my own identity and what that looked like and what kinds of behaviors and stuff were not acceptable or otherwise for a young lady of my seemingly religious background.

Farren described similar opposition to their gender non-conforming behaviors in childhood:
I used to get really mad when people would force me into, like, super girly things. I wasn’t, like, outdoorsy or athletic or anything, but I was definitely a tomboy according to them in some ways. Like, I never liked dolls, always liked Legos and video games and stuff. Gender was just not a huge deal to me until I was told I had to do something or couldn’t do something because I was a girl. Then I got mad.

This combination of religious authority and gender-based hierarchy was a frequent theme throughout participant narratives.

**Defining LGBTQ+ People**

When asked to describe the doctrines of their religious or spiritual tradition with regards to LGBTQ+ people, participants listed a variety of sources. While doctrines were occasionally disseminated directly through religious leaders, more commonly they were communicated via the family or community. Farren noted these different sources in their description of their religion-of-origin’s disaffirming LGBTQ+ doctrines:

When I got older, I remember hearing people say, like, “Being gay is a sin,” or, like, “Love the sin, hate the sinner.” They love that one. I don’t think a lot of it came from the pulpit directly, at least not when I was little. Later on, I for sure remember going to my grandma’s church and hearing some things about the evils of feminism and the gays and birth control and everything else from her crazy pastor, but I think most of what I learned about it came from, like, the community. More like people in the church, my parents’ friends, stuff like that... [Being LGBTQ+] was absolutely a choice. Like, people just decided to go lust after members of the same sex or something. It was definitely seen as a hardcore moral failing. Worse than adultery, worse than a lot of sins, like up there with bestiality or molesting children.
Morgan’s religion-of-origin also framed being LGBTQ+ as unacceptable behavior:
I was taught that God created man and woman... and that everything else is a perversion.
It is a twisting of the beautiful thing, the sacred thing that God created. So, there is no
gender fluidity, there is no nonbinary, it’s just male or female. There’s no trans, just
whatever you were assigned at birth, that is who you are, period. God doesn’t make
mistakes...Being anything other than straight is a perversion and a choice.
Alana’s account, too, described a perspective in which LGBTQ+ people are viewed as
sinful:
God made us man and woman. Man has a penis, woman has vagina, etc. Uh, you know,
only men and women can be together. It is sinful and unholy for anyone to say that
they’re, and, you know, forgive me for using the transphobic language—of course, just
repeating what I’ve heard—uh, you know, and men can’t have babies, so, you know, lots
of really messed-up dynamics around that too.
Tara highlighted the differences between the perspectives of Evangelical Christianity and
Judaism:
[Tara’s religion-of-origin] was very cis-only, heteronormative, you know, monogamy.
Even though I did end up converting to Judaism, which has a much loser and more broad
spectrum of sexuality and gender, I did grow up in Evangelical Christianity. That
environment was very cisgender only, there’s only two genders, there’s only one option
in terms of a relationship on a permanent basis and that’s between a man and a woman
and they have to be married.
Eliza shared her family’s perspective on gender identity and the silence surrounding
issues of sexual orientation, as well as the family’s underlying racism:
I was never taught anything about gender identity other than I was a girl, I wore dresses. Boys wear, you know, pants and a suit. So anything other than that was never brought up in my life. If we ever saw somebody—cuz as a child, I was very vocal about things I saw—I had no problem opening my mouth. And if I saw something different, like even a Black person... My parents are closeted racists. They will never admit to that. But they never brought Black people around me, so when we went out and I saw them, I asked questions about it. As I did if I saw somebody like a trans person, you know, I would say the words like, “Why is that many wearing a dress?” And my parents would say, “Well, that person’s very sick. And there’s something wrong with them. And they don’t have Jesus in their life.” As far as sexuality, being gay was never seen as an option, never discussed. It wasn’t like at a service they were just like “and those gays out there...” It was just not a conversation at all. I didn’t know what it was until I was older. I went to a public school, so of course that’s where I learned what my thoughts were. And then, once I learned, I was like, “Well, that makes sense.”

Purity Versus Lust or Perversion

Each of the examples from the previous section present perspectives which conceive of non-heterosexual orientations or trans identities through a behavioral lens. This emphasis on behavior rather than identity plays a significant role in the framing of LGBTQ+ people as immoral, perverted, or sinful. Morgan’s narrative summarized this distinction:

God had made man for woman and woman for man—emphasis on that latter bit—and to be gay, again, was a perversion and a choice. And I think the reason that that was really pushed... that it was a choice was because that’s how they can justify, you know, calling it a sin. Because if God made a gay person and then punished them for being gay, you
know, that’s a problem. So, if a person chooses to be gay, now God can punish them for it.

Farren described a similar perspective in their religious community:

Gay people were just, like, totally depraved and couldn’t control their lust. I don’t think gender identity ever came up. Like, I knew drag queens existed, but that was about it. And it was always just framed as men dressing like women. Again, usually for perverted reasons.

In addition to the view that being LGBTQ+ is a perversion of God’s original, pure intent, participants also discussed the ways in which the perceived purity of women had significant social and religious ramifications. Tara spoke at length about the atmosphere surrounding the purity of women and the challenge of navigating romantic relationships within her religious community:

It was quite a bit of purity culture, being from the deep South, especially the Bible Belt. There’s a lot of, you know, value placed on whether a woman is sexually active or not, and your value and worth, you know, related to that. You get the sense of “Oh no, if I do the sex before marriage then I’m tainted goods,” or you’ve been somehow irreversibly changed in a way that is negative. That kind of impacts your feeling of self-worth. People who would choose to be sexually active, especially in high school, there was this kind of negative impression that “Oh, well, they’re loose or they’re acting harlot-y” or whatever. And, you know, that kind of gossip can affect people when you’re at that stage of life. You don’t want people talking about you behind your back, like, “Oh no, you had sex outside of marriage! That’s not okay.” Yeah, I look back on it now and I realize how toxic and damaging it was. At the time, I was, like, totally bought into it. I didn’t really
know any better... There was a lot of guilt that came along when I did eventually start
dating. Like, “Oh no, what if what we’re doing isn’t the proper modest behavior? Am I
allowed to make out with the person I’m dating? If I make out with them, are we allowed
to do XYZ? Like, what level of touching each other is okay before it’s, like, immoral?”

I remember attending some kind of, like, youth study or something and questions
from the group came up anonymously. You could submit them and then the speaker
would draw them out of a hat and people were asking, like, really serious, important
questions. Like, “How far is too far?” And I remember him talking about, like, “Oh,
heavy petting is not okay. Like, if you start to kiss somebody, but you’re aroused, that’s
too much.” So it's like, “Oh, you can kiss, but it has to be chaste.” And I think about that
and I’m like, “How are you supposed to engage with somebody on a physical level that
way and constantly be monitoring yourself?” That’s anxiety-inducing. God forbid you
give into your hormones. Afterwards, you feel, like, ashamed and dirty, somehow, and
you start wondering, like, why humans have these impulses if they’re so wrong. And the
common Evangelical, I guess, slant on that is, “Well, you know, the desires are okay, but
you have to channel them into a marriage. You know, you can’t just do them outside of
marriage.” So it’s very restrictive and you kind of view your own, your own bodily
impulses as somehow unclean. And “Oh no, I shouldn’t be feeling this, but if I do, I have
to control it.” I don’t feel like that’s a very reasonable thing to expect of most people,
much less teenagers, once they’ve started to hit puberty. I’m not currently dating—I just
don’t have much of an interest in it—but sometimes I think about how comfortable or
uncomfortable I would be if I was in a relationship with someone and the topic of
physical intimacy came up.
Valerie noted that the purity guidelines were emphasized differently based on gender:

In some ways, it was like a more intense version of the way that society as a whole has a double-standard about sex for men and women. Girls painted as whores if they lose their virginity too young or sleep with too many boys, but boys get congratulated about their conquests. It’s not like boys were encouraged to do that, but they weren’t punished for it the way girls were. I remember a girl in our church got pregnant when I was about 15 and it was a huge scandal. She and her parents disappeared from the church for a while and when they came back people still talked about the girl like she was a whore and a sinner. Other parents kept their children away from her like something would rub off on them.

The boy who got her pregnant was there [in the church] the whole time, but no one said much about him.

Devon also commented on the impact of purity culture on their upbringing:

We were very, like, well, I would say obsessed with the idea of purity and of holiness and of staying free from sin. And that applied to me even more because I was a girl and that meant I had all these extra things put on me of protecting my virtue and keeping myself clean for my future husband. The emphasis was always on the man, though. Like, if I were to lose my virginity, I would be hurting my future husband. It wasn’t necessarily about me, like, of course, they would say all the warnings about, like, getting pregnant or getting diseases, but when it really came down to it, it was more about me taking something away from my future husband. It was very ownership-based. Like, my father owned me up until I got married and then I passed to my husband. That was super clear when, like, we had what’s called “purity balls” where we would get dressed up and it would be all nicely decorated and all and we would make promises to our fathers that we
would stay pure until marriage. And there was like a promise ring that we’d wear as a sign of our promise and to remind us that we were supposed to protect our purity. It feels very creepy and... I don’t even have the words for it, really. It just feels like we were very much property.

**Hell and Punishment**

Participants discussed various consequences to LGBTQ+ behavior as delineated by their religions-of-origin. These included both real-world punishments or negative outcomes as well as spiritual consequences. Alana shared that:

There were definitely some times where I was brought into church as a form of discipline or punishment, or, you know, trying to eradicate some of the more rebellious behaviors. Especially with regards to my gender expression and my sexual orientation and stuff like that.

Heath’s family and religious community “thought that, you know, being gay shouldn’t just be illegal, it should be... punished capitally.” Shannon received similar messages following the death of a family member:

My dad’s cousin committed suicide—he was gay—and I was told he did the right thing in the wrong way. He drove the tractor to run over him when dad was coming to get him, and his father shouldn’t have had to have seen that. But him committing suicide was the right thing to do because he was going to hell.

Many participants explained that their family members continue to express concern regarding their adult child’s sexual orientation or gender identity. These concerns impact their parent-child relationships. Alana described some of these impacts:
It was tough, too, because, like, there’s pressure from my family. And we have a good relationship now; we’ve come to terms with a lot of this, but, like... I don’t think my parents are very well-equipped for dealing with it cuz it’s like... You know, “When I think of my daughter going to hell, like, that’s the worst possible thing.”

Shannon’s family expresses similar concerns during their interactions:

It is weird to me that my sister and my mom and my other sister... pretty much every time we talk it’s that...It’s not that they don’t love me; it’s that I’m going to hell. And their love for me is the concern.

Interestingly, despite religious conversion or nonbelief, some participants still experience ongoing fear or anxiety regarding issues of hell or spiritual punishment. Farren shared their experience of this phenomenon:

I know my beliefs. I know what I think is right, and I absolutely disagree with a lot of the things I grew up with, but I sometimes get this feeling, like... What if I’m wrong? I mean, I don’t believe in hell, but I still get panics that I’m going there sometimes. It just sucks. Like logically, I know what I believe, but there’s still this emotional, gut feeling that I fucked up and I’m going to be punished for it. Like the disappointment and disgust is one thing that keeps me from coming out to everyone in my life, but I also don’t wanna see the pity look. Like, “Oh, look at this poor sinner” can be all over their faces when they’re “not-judging” other people. And, like, my mom would probably cry because she would be so afraid of me going to hell. I don’t wanna do that to her, but like... I am who I am. I just wish I could find a way to get that fear out of me.

Shannon reported that she experiences lingering concern regarding apocalyptic teachings regarding the Rapture and Tribulation:
When it’s too quiet outside, when I don’t hear enough human activity, or when I go looking for someone and I can’t find them, and I can’t raise another human’s attention within X amount of time... I’m not a believer anymore and I think the Rapture’s happened. And I have to talk myself through: You’re not one of the people, people left in the world and... But I still get... an insane level of terror. Just, even as a kid, before I knew, before I knew I was bi, I knew I was different. And I knew about the Rapture before I knew about algebra. And... I didn’t think I was gonna go. At any point did I think I was gonna be part of the Rapture. And I’m still... part of me is still wondering, “am I gonna turn around someday and three-quarters of the world is just gone?” And I grew up in the 90s, so, like, nuclear holocaust, we were still told every day in school that the world was gonna end and three-quarters of the population is gonna be dead, and we’re probably gonna die a long and slow, painful death. And the best thing you could hope for was to be in the blast zone. But yeah, I still... If it’s too quiet, I wonder. And it’s not reasonable!... I used to open a restaurant alone when I was a retail manager. Even at a mall site, I would go in early—it’s the best time to get it done. But... when it’s approaching store time and people aren’t opening the other stores, it’s still, uh... is there a chance?

**LGBTQ+ Identity Development**

Participants shared various ways in which they felt their courses of identity development were impacted by their religious upbringings. This tended to manifest in one of two ways: delayed integration into their LGBTQ+ identities/communities, or early/increased sexual experimentation. Farren described their developmental path as having aspects of both:
I think [lack of exposure to accurate information and disaffirming religious doctrines] definitely slowed me down in some ways and sped me up in others. Like, I don’t think I would’ve been as crazy or experimenting with stuff as I was in high school and college if I hadn’t started from there, you know? But I felt like I didn’t really have a framework, especially for dating or knowing how to navigate relationships. Like, it was all about finding a husband and that being it, so dating and navigating the queer community was like a whole ‘nother planet. I feel like I’ve settled down, but, like, I’m getting older now. I feel like—and I’ve seen this in other people, my friends and all—I think I would’ve been further along if I’d had more of a framework to work from. Like, some of my friends went through all of this crap, finding out who they are, understanding their identities, becoming part of the queer community, all that stuff was way earlier for them. I felt like basically a high schooler in my 20s and now I’m just becoming an adult... My path to adulthood was way longer and way more confusing than it should’ve been if I hadn’t, like, grown up in a dark cave with no other gays. I mean, I know for a fact that there were other queer folks around me growing up, but none of us were out. We wouldn’t dare. I have an ex-boyfriend from church that I’m absolutely sure is bisexual, but, like, I had to explain to him that that was a thing later on. We had a conversation, like, in our mid-20s? I basically talked him through feeling like neither the gay nor the straight label really fit him and, like, I’m just like, “You know there are other options.” It blew his mind. But that’s what I mean: I had to learn all this shit myself and figure out who I am, what all this means, and how it affects my world all on my own. And sometimes I still feel like I don’t have it all together. Like, I know who I am. My identity makes sense to me. But I feel like it’s not stable sometimes. Like that parable about
building a house with the right foundations. My friends have their identities built on stone and they’re confident and happy, but sometimes I feel like mine is built on sand. I’m confident and happy in my identity, but there’s still a base of uncertainty and fear.

Bryce shared that he felt unprepared for establishing a queer identity and integrating with the community:

I had no kind of education. It was pretty much learn by trial-and-error on your own... I wasn’t prepared for a lot of things... I came from private schools, I went to a public college, and it was a really rough transition there. I hadn’t really dated much or done anything in high school. I had a girlfriend at that time. I never felt like it was the right fit for me, but companionship was great and that part of it I enjoyed. But I never felt like I was being myself. And it wasn’t until I was well into my college years that I finally realized and it basically dawned on me, “Oh, now I get it. This is what I want. This is what I like.” I had to find it out for myself. I had a couple of bad experiences, but, for the most part, you know, being as naïve and shy as I was, I didn’t have anything really horrible happen to me.

Heath also described delayed recognition of and establishment of his queer identity:

When I was extremely young, like three, I encountered gender and was like, “Oh, I’m probably, you know, I’m this,” and very quickly realized that I absolutely couldn’t be this. And then I did not have a single thought or question in my head about whether I was queer until I was in college. Now, you know, were there those questions, you know, or those things that I look back and I go, “Oh my god, like, sweetie, what was wrong with you?” Yes, absolutely, but, like, consciously I shut all of it off completely. So, like, first of all the fact that I had to do that in order to be safe is like, honestly, like that is an
enormous amount of, like, just pure brain energy to shut that off. Especially from such an incredibly young age... I did not start questioning whether maybe I might not be straight until I was 24 and I didn’t come out until I was 25. And, frankly, the only reason I finally sat down and dealt with it was because I suddenly realized that I was in love with a woman. And I went, “Oh, fuck.” And then the gender stuff all fell into place very quickly after that and, you know, all the things. But like that... god, just the amount of, like I said before, brain energy and exhaustion and frustration from having to deal with all of that extra stuff in addition to whatever else is culturally already a problem with trying to figure out queerness, you know, it was just so unnecessary and so, so destructive.

Tara expressed similar experiences with delayed identity development:

Those definitions [of strictly defined gender roles, performance, and behaviors] never really fit me when I was growing up and I felt because I wasn’t the typical feminine, whatever I was, kind of tomboyish, that maybe I wasn’t, like, fully a female. Like, I just didn’t have the words. I didn’t have the vocabulary to even question my gender at that time. I was just tomboyish and I wore a lot of, you know, guys’ clothes, and I didn’t think much of it. But I look back now and think, “Wow, if I had known anything about the transgender community, I may have experimented with a different gender presentation entirely.” It just didn’t seem like an option; I didn’t even know it was an option at that time. Growing up, I was taught, like, “Oh, but if you’re a woman and you’re attracted to other women, that’s not okay. You should only be attracted to guys, you know, everything else is wrong.” As an adult, I’m like, “No, there are attractive women out there and I’m okay with that. There’s attractive guys out there and I’m also okay with
that.” That’s not something that teenage mee would’ve found comfortable, like, at all.
And knowing that about myself and kind of accepting that part of myself has probably
opened up a lot of doors for me in terms of if I do start dating again, you know. It
wouldn’t just be restricted to, like, one specific gender. There’s, you know, many fish in
the sea.
Oliver shared a sense of regret with regards to the impact of religious upbringing on
identity development and his enjoyment of his time as a young adult:

Depending on the life stage you’re talking about, there’s been quite a lot of impacts of the
church on just... I feel like, in a sense, it deprived me of a normal way of growing up and
discovering my sexuality. Whatever normal is. I guess normal doesn’t exist, but just a
more... a way that doesn’t involve guilt and shame... I don’t feel, until very recently, I’ve
been able to fully have a full lease on life. I don’t know if that’s the expression. But, like,
just being able to experience all the richness and love and joy and... You know, it’s only
now that I’m being like, “I’ve only got this life to live and I’ve just gotta,” you know, and
I’m in my late 20s, so I feel like there’s time. But I also feel like so many years were also
wasted. And when I talk to other people who didn’t have that same, like, religious
experience or, you know, went into Evangelicalism or anything sort of fundamental, and,
you know, they’re like, “Oh yeah, you know, I travelled the world and I partied and I did
this.” And I’m so envious because I’m like, “Well, I always felt too guilty to do that.” I
was like, “Well, God doesn’t want me to do that, so I’m not gonna go do that.” And then,
when I did go do that for a couple of years, you know, I ended up feeling guilty and
doubling down [on religiosity]. So I just feel like, in some ways, I kind of... Yeah, it’s the
regret of the missed experience. Because I was told, like, you know, being part of the world would be unfulfilling. And so it became a self-fulfilling prophecy, I think.

Peer Interactions

In addition to difficulties with identity development, participants also described struggles with navigating peer relationships. Friendships, romantic relationships, and interactions with acquaintances were all noted as affected areas. Morgan elucidated the challenges that resulted growing up in a religious environment that encouraged evangelism in all contacts with outsiders:

I was a missionary kid and I was encouraged to make friends specifically with the goal of evangelizing them. I didn’t have any peer friendships at that time because I was also homeschooled. The really short end of the stick there. Homeschooled in a third world country and the only friends I really was encouraged to make were friends that I could evangelize to, which, as you know, is clearly establishing a sense of superiority and perceived power differential, which negatively affects any actual friendship that could be built. Because no one wants to be friends with someone who is only friends with you so they can try to change you... All of those things kind of created a very warped view of the world for me. That colonizer mindset. That, you know, if you love someone, you are gonna share the gospel with them because if you don’t, they are gonna go to hell. And how can you say that you love someone if you just let them go to hell.

Heath described particular difficulty in interacting with LGBTQ+ peers:

In college, I finally actually met real life gay people for the first time, at least, like, knowingly, you know, and was... I had no idea what to do with myself, I was... I mean, to be perfectly frank, my initial response was horror. I didn’t know what to do with a gay person sitting in front of me. I was horrified, you know, this was an existence that was so
foreign. I was so cut off from the rest of the world. I had no idea how to interact with somebody actually real sitting in front of me and I’m very... like, to this day, I’m very, you know, embarrassed how poorly I treated that person, just because I had no idea what to do and no context at all. And I very quickly went and got some because I was like, “Holy... like, I can’t. Like, I don’t know what to do with this.” I was coming out of, you know, hearing sermons where people were talking how if, you know, a pastor was literally saying, you know, “If my kid was gay, I would prefer to kill him then have him marry some guy.” You know, so I... It took so long to work through how to think about all of that. And, you know, it means I harbored all of these incredibly ill feelings toward people and did things that I look back and I’m extremely not proud of. Like the guilt from that alone is just really difficult and, you know, I was a kid. I legitimately didn’t know better. I had no exposure to the world. So, like, I get that, but, like, it’s still really hard to deal with after the fact.

Tara shared a similar experience with a transgender peer, but emphasized that change is possible through education and meaningful contact:

I remember when I met, like, my first, like, transgender acquaintance. I had no idea what to do or say, or how to behave, and boy am I embarrassed about the way I talked to them. Oh boy, oh boy, and I don’t know if this person would ever consider talking to me even though it’s been almost 20 years, but if they did, I would absolutely be like, “Hey, listen, that was really stupid stuff that I said cuz I was ignorant. I have several friends that are actually very close friends that are trans and they’ve... they haven’t personally done any, like, educational work cuz I’ve taken that labor on myself, but I look at that and I’m like, “Okay, yeah, this is cool. This is fine. And I just think about, like, this one person that I...
I just didn’t get it and they were totally right not to interact with me because of it. So it’s one of those things where it’s like, you hear about people who are whatever-phobic, and we tend to write them off as a lost cause. That’s not always the case. There’s quite a bit of hope out there for people who are at varying levels of their phobia, whatever it is. I think probably it’s predicated on whether or not they want to educate themselves or they want to stay where they are, and I’ve never been content staying where I am.

Alana shared an experience of witnessing negative peer interactions within the religious community:

There was a boy in my youth group who had a bit of a gender-variant expression, I would say, and liked to wear his hair long. But, you know, he was still like, “I’m a boy, I just like to have long hair.” And, you know, hearing the other kids, having internalized this belief, you know, at a young age, using slurs, you know, about... especially those conflating gender and sexuality, cuz there’s zero nuance there, of course.

Navigating romantic relationships, a task likely affected by hampered identity development, played a role for many participants both as youths and as adults. Tara described her struggles with adult romantic relationships:

It’s kind of like, “Okay, well, I need to be able to talk about my own needs and desires in an adult way with someone else who is also able to communicate them in an adult way.” Having kind of had to process a lot of this on my own, I feel like it put me behind the eight ball in a lot of ways. Cuz I see friends and colleagues who are in relationships to varying levels of success and it doesn’t seem like they are dealing with any of these kinds of issues, and I don’t know if it’s because their childhood was different, or if they worked through it in their own way before they started dating, or if they did it while they were
dating. It’s kind of a mystery to me and it’s also made me wonder if the way that I view my own sexuality has been somehow skewed.

Oliver discussed a sense of hesitation with regards to relationships:

In terms of sexuality, definitely, I think, although I’ve worked through it a lot, I definitely think it results in me always being... For example, because I am bi myself, I do feel like there will be the natural hesitation towards being with a guy because I just, um, you know, know that, it’s a thing to work through. Not just with family, but with me being like, “This is normal; this is okay,” you know? And, you know, feeling accepted and...

Since leaving the church, I’ve only actually dated queer women. Because I feel accepted with them and, you know, being at peace with that...I still do kind of feel like I do box myself in and stop myself from sometimes doing the things that would make me happy because I realize, you know, there’s more complications behind that. Or it’s just such a subconscious thing that I can’t even, like, really address it.

Devon, similarly, shared their reluctance to enter into certain relationships due to external influences:

I do tend to date men more often. Not, like, because of any particular preference towards that, but just because I feel like it’s easier. Like, I don’t have to hear it from my parents or deal with any of that bullshit. Which I hate cuz like I know I’m probably missing out on people I’d really get on with just because I don’t have the energy to deal with it.

Farren reported that their tendency towards heterosexual-presenting relationships partially stems from their residual concerns regarding hell and spiritual punishment:

I’ve dated a lot more men than anybody else because, like, for one thing, I don’t have to worry about who I’m out to or not. Like, I can bring them around my family if I want and
no one cares. I think that’s a lot of the reason my family thinks I’m straight. But I also think, like, would I settle down with a woman, really? That would be, like, committing myself to queerness in a way I don’t think I’ve fully worked through yet. I definitely wanna get married and settle down someday, but somewhere in the back of my mind I still get that feeling, like, “Is this really a sin and I’m gonna go to hell?” There’s so much emphasis on, like, “If you don’t believe or if you turn away from God, it’s because you’re being deceived” and I think there’s a part of me somewhere that still really believes that. I might figure it out eventually, who knows.

Experiences of Abuse

Some participants reported incidents of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse which took place either in religious contexts or within religious families. Shannon shared a story of potential sexual abuse within a church, but emphasized uncertainty with regards to whether the incident was intentional or accidental conduct. Regardless, the incident felt “to this day, still creepy” and remains a disturbing memory for her. Morgan described her insular religious community as the ideal environment for a predator:

I didn’t really have friends, which made me very emotionally vulnerable to anyone who showed me attention. Which is why it was easy for me to fall prey to a man in our church who was a church leader, married, and my dad’s best friend, who groomed me from the ages of 15 to 17.

Heath remarked on the prevalence of abuse both within his family and throughout his religious community:

Frankly, [abuse] was extraordinarily common. I didn’t know a single family in that world that didn’t have pretty bad abuse going on in some form or another. The, you know, the
requirement for corporal punishment of children was pretty inherent to that. Like, even if nothing else was going on, that was absolutely going on. And, you know, we’re not talking a smack—we’re talking extensive corporal punishment. And it’s also a great place for sexual predators to hide because nobody will ever tell anybody anything outside the circles, right? So it’s, you know, there was a lot of... God, I hate all of the possible terms. I guess incest, a lot of bad shit. So, in a lot of senses, they were tied together in my family. They were tied together in most families in my particular niche.

**AREs**

In addition to clearly defined incidences of abuse, various other AREs were mentioned throughout participant narratives. The responses of family and/or religious communities to reports of abuse or other negative experiences were sources of immense distress for participants. Morgan remarked on the ways in which reports of abuse or sexual assault were handled within her religious community and within her religious university:

As a woman, if something happens to you, the first thing to do is to ask, “What did you do to deserve it?”... It became, just, really hard to justify some of the behaviors of some of my peers and professors... Like, women who would report sexual abuse or harassment on campus—it was almost always portrayed as their own fault. They were encouraged not to talk about anything as to not bring strife and division to the community. And if they had done anything that could possibly have been perceived as, like, asking for it, they would be punished. They were suspended, or they were threatened with suspension if they spoke about it.
Alana recalled negative experiences related to the behavior of men within her religious community, restrictive doctrines regarding sexuality and gender expression, and justifications for abuse:

I didn’t like the attention I was getting. I had puberty really early, so I looked way, way older and I was getting a lot of male attention... Especially from some of the men at church who were married, ostensibly heterosexual, God-fearing men, quote/unquote, and, you know, just like... realizing that. Like, my body was not my own, and that I was being told that decisions were dictated for me. And those decisions were that I was supposed to be with a cishet dude because I was a cishet woman and therefore needed to, like, fall in line with all of those things... I remember going to a family therapy session one time with like...well, I really don’t think the dude was licensed for shit, in retrospect, but, uh, pardon my French. And asking me that I needed to ask God’s forgiveness, that he could liberate me from this queerness because I hadn’t asked God to forgive me for being abused as a child, which is why I still hated men. Which is, like, not even true, because I’m kinda just “I like what I like,” but... Definitely, that caused a lot of issues for me as my own behavior started to emerge because, like, and my own identity started to emerge cuz I was deviating from the norm... A lot of the justifications that were given to me for, like, why the abuse happened and whatnot, how I was acting-out or acting in a non-God-honoring lifestyle or whatever, and, like... just a lot of reinforcement any time I would try to talk to people who I thought I could trust. I mean, trusted mentors or, like, trusted friends, or other people who I had opened up to about this thing that was really difficult for me to talk about.
Tara discussed an experience of listening to a religious speaker and again noted the extent to which purity culture and justification for sexual assault was ingrained in her community:

I remember listening to a speaker when I was, I think, in middle school. Maybe like eighth grade-ish. And I remember the speaker talking about how he didn’t like the way women were dressing at that time. He thought it was too sexy and he said, “If you’re not in business, don’t advertise.” At the time, you know, not having any other real reference point, I thought “Yeah, yeah, that’s right! Don’t be, you know, a loose woman!” And I remember when I grew up and I started to kind of come around on a lot of these topics and realize that what you do or do not do in the bedroom, like, first of all, what’s wrong with sex work? Second of all, women aren’t a business. Your clothing is not advertising your willingness to engage in sexual acts. And that took way too long for me to internalize. There was a lot of internalizing because of speakers like that. It was very virgin/whore dichotomy type of stuff, so yeah, it... That was just one incident that sticks out in my mind. There’s lots of little things along the way that filled those little gaps, but that one in particular I still think about...You should be, like, demure, and you should be modest, and if you’re showing any body part that might possibly make men think a sexual thought it’s your fault. You know, you’re responsible for other people’s thoughts. You know that is not the case. Again, it took a very long time for me to get out of that, I don’t want to say brainwashing, but that you just hear things growing up and you don’t question them.

Farren shared several experiences during which the threat of ostracization, death, and eternal punishment were presented, at times graphically, throughout their youth:
It wasn’t just, like, the talking about that stuff [sin and the threat of hell], but there were, like, actual things showing us that. Like I was at school and I remember watching this movie about someone almost dying—well, they did die, they just kept bringing them back in the ambulance—and there were these scenes where she was in hell that were super fucked up for little kids to be watching. I remember it showed her being tied up with this, like, barbed-wire gag on her mouth, and she was looking around in the darkness watching monsters and demons torturing people, burning and melting flesh, it was really bad. I’m sure it was, like, really bad, low-budget special effects, but at the time it was really scary. It really upset me. Sometimes I would go home and cry after school or at night in my room because I was so afraid, like, my dad would go to hell because he divorced my mom, for instance. And then, later, that became me being afraid that I would go to hell because I was bi. And there would be nothing I could do about it because I’m just like this... There were other things that played into it too. Like, we went to the Trip to Hell thing every year around Halloween—which I was never allowed to celebrate by the way because Satan—once I hit, like, middle school age, and that was really bad. It was, like, basically a walk through the forest at night where they had these different stations set up. Each one was based around a different sin and it would show the horrible things that would happen to people as a result. Like, there was one about drunk driving that was always super gory. It would have a wrecked car and someone hanging out of it and dying slowly and going to hell to be tortured by demons or whatever. At least one year there was one about abortion that was absolutely insane. It had, like, a girl in there for the operation up in the stirrups and it basically showed an abortion. Or, at least, what they wanted people to think an abortion was. Of course, it was super gory and bloody and
gross and was like they were dismembering a full grown infant. Like, to this day I can still picture this in my mind. And this was put together and we were dragged through by people who wouldn’t even let kids celebrate Halloween, or go to R rated or scary movies, but somehow this was fine because it was a good message or whatever. And, of course, the whole thing ended with a thing that was, like, basically a horror house, their imagination of what hell would be like. It’s so weird to me that I can still remember it so clearly even though this was years ago. Like, why? I’ve definitely seen scary movies and been to Halloween haunted houses and stuff since then, but literally nothing sticks with me like the shit I saw at church and school when I was growing up.

Some participants described AREs which occurred during adulthood rather than during their religious upbringings. Morgan also went through a divorce and described her religious community’s response as “abysmally horrible.” Bryce shared an experience of rejection from the priest who had recently conducted his mother’s funeral:

I was very impressed with the way that he handled the funeral and he did a very nice job by us. Everybody was really happy and it was what she would’ve liked... About a month later, after the funeral, I went back to the priest who had done the service and I said, “I’d really like to join the parish. I’d like to, you know, fit back into a regular routine again and start coming more often. And this is a very nice parish—I’d like to belong to it.”

And he said that he would be happy to take me on as a parishioner, and he would take my husband as a parishioner, but he would never recognize us as a couple. And this was only a decade ago. And we live in a community that’s pretty liberal. There’s a large gay community that’s on the outskirts of it. So for somebody to take that much of a stance,
that was kinda my last straw. I had had it with Catholicism at that point and their bigotry.

So I left.

Oliver described a negative experience involving the process of the formal disconnection of “soul ties” (i.e., spiritual links thought to exist between an individual and their former sexual partners):

Having to, sort of, feel guilty and renounce and, um, cut those soul ties with previous partners I had been with... I feel like a lot of that, for me, was because I felt a lot of shame over having had [non-heterosexual] experiences like that and that I’d let down family, that I’d let down myself... a huge negative experience for me.

While Quinn’s religion-of-origin was relatively LGBTQ+ affirming, they encountered bigoted members of their current religious community:

For background, this was shortly after the Episcopal church consecrated their first openly gay, partnered bishop, and they were, like, getting blowback from some of the other churches in the Anglican communion about that. And yeah, some of the, like, convention delegates were like, “We should just kick all the gay people out of the church and then we wouldn’t get these problems with the international church and, like, there’s not that many of them, so it would be fine, and, like...” And I don’t know. It was just, like, super uncomfortable because I was, like, working for them. And, like, you know, they weren’t like, “that’s not an okay thing to say.”... There have been some other things that, like, various priests have said, you know. Ridiculous and transphobic things, at times...

There’s been a variety of little things.

Shannon endured an exorcism in her youth and Eliza described regular occasions during which “on Sunday morning, [members of the large congregation] would all lay hands on me and
pray. And I just felt so gross.” Both of these rites were intended to “cure” LGBTQ+ tendencies or curb unacceptable behaviors. Eliza also provided a vivid account of the ways in which AREs and disaffirming actions occurred after she was “outed”:

It wasn’t until, like, my freshman year that I dated a girl and I was like, “Oh my gosh” and I kept it hidden. I was very quiet about it; no one knew. And my dad thought I was doing drugs cuz I was being secretive... He, like, waited in his van for four hours for me to go to my car and see what I was doing, and it was just me saying goodbye to my girlfriend. I kissed her. He saw it and I didn’t know until I started walking back into the house and I saw him. And he basically said, you know, “Never talk to me again.” And he left...When my mom found out about it, I knew, cuz I came into the house and she was sitting on the chair and she was just sobbing uncontrollably. She was just like, “I’m worried about you. I’m worried about your faith. I’m so worried that you are gonna be sad your whole life if you keep doing this. And I was like, “Okay?” And I don’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to say because I haven’t talked to anybody about it. So once that kind of blew over, she was just kind of crying all the time. And then any time I would say, you know, “What’s wrong?” It was just like, “I’m so worried for you. This is so sad.” And then I was told that I had to go talk to somebody in the church... So they kinda sat me down and they kinda played the, you know, “We’re best buds, yeah, you know, your family, they just love you...” And I didn’t feel love. I felt judged. I was hurt. I felt like this part of me that didn’t feel wrong unless I put their feelings into the mix, with how they look at me. And then they started, they stopped talking to their friends about me altogether. And then they started being like, “We need to pray for [Eliza’s] journey, or her, what she’s going through right now. She’s going through a lot of mental
problems.” Seen as a sickness. So then I started thinking, “Well, maybe God’s not real, because... I thought God was love. I thought he was acceptance. And I thought he was all these things, and that’s not what I was receiving for something that didn’t feel wrong until I thought about them, and I thought about what they would say, and how they would feel about me... I’m talking to this priest and he’s like, you know, “People sin and we just have to give it to God. And if you give it to God then you’ll feel whole. You’ll be whole.” And he was just, he was erring on the side of, you know, “God created you gay, that’s what makes [Eliza Eliza]. Because he did that, it’s just your thing that you have to keep away from. You know, some people it’s drugs, some people...” And he even said, like, “Child porn or animal bestiality. And that’s just how they feel and how God built them, but it’s our choice whether we act on them. And instead, you know, he wants us to feel close to him. So it’s something you give to him in order to be close to him and then, once you’re there, then you’re whole. So then I had this mentality of, “Oh, okay, he doesn’t want to change me. I just can’t act on this. And if I keep doing, keeping guys and keep going down this road, then I’ll feel whole. God will make me whole.” So then I started being super-duper suicidal, which I would think about killing myself. I told, you know, my best friend about it at the time. It turned out she was also gay and we grew up since we were three together. And she had a totally different outcome with her parents than I did mine. Night and day. So I was just deciding, you know, maybe God doesn’t want me alive. Maybe he only can give you what you can handle and I can’t handle this. My parents decided that I couldn’t have music. And I played guitar and music was my life. So they took away my stereo, they took away my guitars, because they wanted me to focus on me. And they were like, “You’re not in trouble—you just need to get away from
this stuff.” So they took away music, and they took away all this stuff, and I just felt so lonely. And I wasn’t allowed to go anywhere. You know, I went to this therapist... I wasn’t listening the whole time. It was like, that part of my life is really hard to recall cuz I think I blacked it out. And I just didn’t want to be here anymore because I didn’t feel anyone loved me. And it was to the point where I was... I did everything. I did everything they asked me to and it wasn’t fulfilling. And they were basically saying, “You’re not trying hard enough. If you loved your family, you would try hard enough... [I was] at the point where I felt gross at myself and I hated myself. And I just thought, “why would God create this? Where he would make my parents cry...” My parents, at the time, they stopped saying “I love you,” they stopped being proud of me, showing they were proud of me. So then my grades started to fall because I’m so focused on trying to wrap my head around this, and I was in this dark place, and... again, just super suicidal and stuff like that, and it was that way until like, college, I think.

**Sequelae of AREs and/or Abuse**

Participants universally reported impacts from their experiences of AREs or abuse. Quinn, who grew up within a religion-of-origin which was relatively LGBTQ+ affirming when compared to other participants, noted that there were still limitations to inclusivity:

The Unitarian church has OWL [Our Whole Lives, a lifespan sexuality education curricula], which talks about, you know, teaches a lot about gender and sexuality, I guess. And certainly we had queer people who attended our church and like, that was okay. They could be Sunday school teachers, the whole thing. You know, the church was, I mean, this was like the late ‘90s early 2000s, so like, vaguely supportive, but not, as you know, it was a slightly different milieu than we have today. But, at least in my church,
like, that wasn’t couched in terms of religious beliefs very much, and is certainly something that could have been. The Unitarians have their, I think there are eight principles now, but there were seven principles back then, one of which is “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and it could have been couched in that way and it just wasn’t... Like, eighth grade was also when my school system... did some sex ed and it was very clear that we were getting a more thorough education in church than in school, but a lot of it was more like, “This is how you have safe sex. This is, like, contraception and stuff.” And there wasn’t very much about, like, LGBT Stuff at all really. I don’t even think like, “This is how you have safe sex that is not, like, penis-in-vagina,” which, a few years later when I thought about this, I went and, like, talked to our, like, Director of Religious Education and was like, “We didn’t do this; we should have done this.” And she was like, “Yeah, they should have done that and I’ll make sure that happens in the future.” Because that is definitely something that the school system didn’t cover. And I know that there are modules now, like, as part of the curriculum, that are talking about LGBT stuff and, like, sexual orientation and gender identity and all of that. And that are more, like, sensitive to, like, talking about body parts without being, like, “This is what men have and this is what women have.” I think some of those changes were made in the last 10 or 15 years, and certainly weren’t [there] when the version of the curriculum was used for me when I was, like, in the late ‘90s... There were parts [of the prevailing attitude at the time of Quinn’s upbringing] that were extremely frustrating. Like, this was the church my parents went to. They were fine with, like, going to church with queer people, but not so... like, much more uncomfortable with it being their own kid. And, in a way, like, it’s not like I wanted my parents to be like some of my friends’ parents [who]
were like, “You’re bad and this is against God” or whatever, but, like, it was sort of more understandable where their parents were coming from...It was just difficult to navigate because you didn’t really know—certainly I didn’t really know—like, how people were gonna react, what people were gonna say because there wasn’t a lot of, like, loud and proud LGBT acceptance. But there also wasn’t, like, people going around saying hateful things, so you didn’t really know where anyone stood...Which is really, like, very similar to how things were at my school as well. I don’t know. It was all just sort of this vague unknowing.

Tara summarized, “I think it would be impossible for [AREs] not to be something that affects me.” Oliver shared that he has experienced mental health issues following his religious experiences, leaving Evangelical Christianity, and the resulting end of his engagement: “I’ve gone in and out of facing depression... [After the] end of that engagement, I was suicidal. So I definitely needed and appreciated the therapy that I got.” Alana, who did not report current impacts, nevertheless acknowledged past challenges:

I know I kinda have an atypical story, but I do like to share it because, like... sometimes these effects and things can come out in slightly more subtle ways, of course. Like, I’m grateful that I haven’t... turned out a lot worse for me. I’m actually doing pretty well, all things considered. Uh, but it hasn’t been an easy road by any means.

Shannon noted that, at times, others have responded to hearing stories from her youth in very different ways:

There’s a lot of times where I’ve been telling a story, and I laugh, and people go, “That’s not really funny. That’s not normal.” And I’m laughing thinking it’s just a normal thing with just, like, a funny angle and everybody’s just like, “No, no it’s not.” And it used to
be jarring, but every time I get a different therapist or have to talk to a temporary one, I inevitably end up hearing, “You lived a really, really traumatic childhood. You’re fairly balanced for everything you went through. Are you aware of that?”

Eliza shared that the reactions from her family and her religious community to her sexual orientation had dramatic effects, some of which persist to this day:

I don’t go to churches anymore because I don’t believe in churches. My faith is strong, and how I feel about God. My wife, on the other hand, skeptical. But churches itself, I feel it’s just a way to berate people and for people to feel good about themselves. Cuz then I found out stuff about, like, one of the guys that was counseling me was arrested for child pornography. But we didn’t talk about that! And then, like, other things within the church nobody talks about because they’re too busy thinking they’re doing well by helping somebody else in their journey, or however they framed it. So I refused to go to a church. If I do, I feel, like, sick. Like, really sick and anxious and I cannot be in a church. Which is really weird, cuz I was there all the time. I even taught and did big things with my family... Things are good now, but it took years and years and years to get there. And I think it was like a week or two before my wedding... I started drinking heavily and, like, really worried because I’m getting married and is this okay? I had a weird relapse. Even then! Even after I’ve said, like, “This is me and I’m happy. I’m fulfilled and this feels good. I feel like I’m on the right venture in my life.” But then not knowing how my mom felt about it. Cuz she never said, “You know what, you know, I’ve done some thinking and this is how I feel about it now.” So she’s never talked to me about it. And I don’t think I ever wanna know. Cuz I think it might put me back in another relapse of things. Cuz their opinion of me matters. It’s my mother. My dad I’ve never been close to—he’s a
little abusive. Um, emotionally and physically, at times, when I was younger. Not so much anymore, just the verbal part. So I don’t really care what he thinks, but, um... I don’t know. My spiritual journey has been odd. In that, you know, younger I felt like I knew what was going on to the point where it led me to possibly commit suicide, to the point where I came back, and then there are times in my life where I do something and then I go back on those thoughts or feelings. It always pulls me back in with what my parents think spirituality is, if that makes sense... I used to teach Sunday School. My mom taught and so did I, if she wasn’t there. And then, after the church knew about [Eliza’s sexual orientation], I was no longer allowed to teach. I was no longer allowed to hang out with my friends because their parents decided that I was a bad influence. Um, so going to the church, I used to go and hang out with my friends and do all that stuff, but now that that was gone, me going to church was me sitting down by myself, separated from everybody. Or I was talking to somebody about how I was a shitty human being who had no love of God in their life. So that impacted me. Just the feeling of hate and judgment. On a, you know, 14 year old. And that’s all I received. Probably why I can’t go to a church anymore.

Farren described their difficulties with recurrent fear of eternal punishment:

It’s been years since I’ve been into a church like that where I felt like the hell and damnation stuff came into it, but it still fucks with me. Every once and a while, I’ll have nightmares or flash back to those images. I still get those moments where I freak out about if I’m gonna go to hell. I just wish people would, like, not underestimate the effect that this stuff has on kids, even if they grow up and get out of it.
Religious Conversion

Participants shared various reasons why they chose to convert from their religion-of-origin, or to leave religion altogether. Shannon described her path as the natural result of critical thinking:

I was always that little kid, even in adult class, “Yeah, but this actually translates to this,” and “This part conflicts with that.” I was always pulling that thread. And I got lucky that I had adult teachers who were like, “No, no, these are good questions! Like, this is where God’s telling us about personal growth and learning more and...” My dad was offended that I was asking these kinds of questions, whereas the teachers were like, “No, we’re supposed to be asking questions; we’re supposed to be learning more.” But the more you learn, the more threads you pull. You don’t stop. You either have to reach a point where you stop asking or start accepting that the doubt is probably the more real.

Oliver explained that, though he struggled with his church’s stance on LGBTQ+ issues, a combination of other factors ultimately led him to leave.

It was a gradual process. I was in a relationship, actually. Engaged to be married... We were both very deeply religious...We were leading [a Bible study], as we had every week and, it was, like, talking about, you know, in relation to a particular trauma, and I was leading it, and I sort of had to do it and to do the program. And I did it well. I answered all the questions as you should and I, you know, dealt with the doubts and the concerns in terms of the lesson, and said the appropriate things when people were asking questions and trusting what I was saying. And then I realized at the end of it that I didn’t believe a word of it myself. But I was so good at performing. And this person know, obviously, that I was bi, but she always had, you know, taken it as “This was [Oliver’s] past life of
sin. He’s, you know, he’s since, like, moved on.” But, you know, when it was coming down to questions about how we would raise kids and what she would do if the kid was queer, she was like, “Well, I will tell him that God expects differently from you.” So that was one thing. But I think ultimately it came down to a lot of questions... I can’t remember the exact thing, but I had a doubt. And I tried to go to the Bible to answer that doubt. And, you know, I couldn’t really find a satisfactory answer. There was an answer, but it wasn’t satisfactory. And I started to peel away, layer by layer, and then I dealt not only with, you know, the sexuality part, but also race. For me, the concern being, of course, the justification of slavery is a big thing. And, you know, God’s word was used to justify it. And for me that was a... it was striking two parts of my identity. And I hadn’t really properly dealt with and challenged myself, and for some reason, engaged to this person, at possibly the worst time, I was challenging myself. Now, though, I think I had to because, essentially, I could see the rest of my life being going to church and serving and possibly being bored out of my mind every single Sunday. And I just, I could just see my trajectory of that life. And I’m so glad I ended up seeing that, but I think it’s, like, that’s what it came down to. “Well, if I believe in this, I have to triple down. I have to properly believe.” And so, yeah, and I think it’s a lot of guilt I feel towards like—I didn’t end the relationship, but my distancing of myself from the faith did end that relationship—she ended it because of that. And I think, actually, that was the right decision for her as well. Because she wanted to raise a family and kids in the Christian faith and I don’t think that would’ve been possible. Though, at the time, I thought maybe it would’ve been... That realization that, even though I would’ve been happy, I wouldn’t have been myself or true. And it’s funny, because for many years I believed that that was
my true self. And then it was like the blinders were coming off and once they had come off, I couldn’t ignore it. So, um, so yeah, it’s kind of a mix of all of those reasons, but yeah... I think, at the end of the day, it wasn’t what—I feel terrible about saying it—but it wasn’t what the Bible said about queer people. And it wasn’t slavery. Although those were definitely, like, issues that contributed. But it was: “Do I actually believe it’s true?” And it came down to a very historical, evidence sort of fact-finding and “Who do I believe in? The actual, historical, like, did this actually happen? Do I actually, can I actually put my faith in this?” Cuz as terrible as it sounds, like, okay, if I believed it’s true, but, you know, they say this about gay people and about slavery, then I’d be like, “Well, I guess it’s just a shitty god I’m serving, but, you know, they’re true, so what can I do?” Um, but, you know, I think it did come to, at the end of the day, “Oh, I actually don’t believe in this.” And that ended up being a turning point. Whether I would say all the issues about sexuality and race for me, and, you know, purity culture, in particular, and how we were living and how we should honor God, kind of turned my attention towards, well, actually, “What do I believe and what does the Bible say? And does that actually sound like a good answer?”

Alana explained that she felt she was pushed away from her religion-of-origin due to its authoritarian nature, purity culture, hypocrisy, and response to the child sexual assault she had endured:

That’s kind of one of those things that really did push me away, cuz I was a survivor of childhood sexual assault by an older family member and so, whenever I started kind of grappling with these topics, or wanting to challenge the status quo, especially surrounding when we had the Prop 8 thing happening here in California—cuz I was in
high school then and really kinda just wanted to be myself. And getting mad at fellow youth group members and stuff cuz I am still dragged into going here and there... I was like, “Well, does the Bible dictate our politics, like, separation of church and state is very convenient for y’all at other times, but, like, apparently this is not worth it.” And so that really was the thing that pushed me away... When I was starting to quote/unquote “act-out,” it became, “Oh, it’s because you were abused as a child, which is why you reject men now.” It was like, “Oh, you’re dishonoring God in your lifestyle. Like, are you really, like, guarding your heart? Like, think about your future husband.” And it’s like, those kinds of messages, after hearing them enough, like, it’s just like, I do not care. I do not buy into this, so like, feel free to tell me what you want to tell me, but like... I reject the premise. And that’s like the ultimate distance-from-God thing you can do, right?... I don’t like to be like, “Oh, it was, like, sex and alcohol that got me to leave the church,” but it really was. Especially the messaging around premarital sex and, like, same-sex relationships and all that kind of stuff. I’m like, “Well, I’m not any less of a person [after my first consensual sexual experience], I don’t think. In fact, like, I kinda liked that, you know?” Unlike the abuse that I faced when I was younger, which perhaps involved some of the same body parts, but was not at all, like, a good experience. So I’m like, “Well, that wasn’t so bad—why are they all so hung up about this?” And so, like, basically, it sounds kinda silly, but it really did kinda like... That was pretty much it for me. I’m like, “This doesn’t make any sense. Like, if God didn’t want us doing this, he wouldn’t make it that fun, so...” And I was already, like, having such a hard time even accepting the premise of a higher power, accepting the premise of someone who I cannot see but can talk to me but isn’t actually there. Isn’t in person, but I just have to believe
it’s true. Like, the circular logic... I’m too, like, logical and direct of a person. I just, like, I couldn’t buy in anymore. I’m like, “well, I mean, if God himself wants to show himself here, but he’s not gonna do that under this faith framework, so why should I accept anything else?” Like, my parents taught me really good lessons growing up about, like, kindness to others and acceptance. And it always was acceptance—to a point. But for me, it was like, “Well, why should I, like, be judging people for things that they’re choosing to do as long as they’re not hurting themselves or hurting others? Like, whatever!” And so, like, those are still things that I hold onto. And, like, a lot of the tenets that Evangelical Christians, in my experience, tend to reserve as exclusive to their communities, like, are stuff that I believe in very strongly. I had a career in civil service, I work to fight climate change, I, you know, I’m involved heavily in mutual aid and, you know, helping redistribute wealth and resources. Like, that’s my life. That is what I love. And that, you know, didn’t disappear just because I stopped being a Christian.

Many participants chose to convert, or are in the process of converting to, other, more affirming religions or spiritual traditions. Tara described her conversion from Christianity to Judaism as a gradual process, ultimately decided by a critical analysis of religious text and doctrine:

[Why I converted] is a long story, but I guess the long and the short of it is that I found the way I was reading the text didn’t line up with the way that the people around me were reading it. And I was like, “Okay, I feel like we’re not on the same page anymore, so I’m just gonna find some people who maybe are on the same page as me.” And that process ended up leading me into Judaism, in which I learned “Oh no, there’s many branches and all but, like, one of them are okay with same sex partnerships and marriages. Surprise,
there’s a very long history of, you know, gender spectrum and intersex people.” And I’m like, “Oh, okay! This isn’t the restrictive, patriarchal religion that I kind of grew up around and it’s a faith tradition that changes along with society, whereas I feel like Evangelicalism does its best not to change with society.” You know, 400 years ago, people who were like, “Oh no, same sex relationships are wrong!” Those people are still thinking that, whereas most other, I guess, cultures have kind of moved past that mode of thinking. There’s more acceptance for people who don’t fit the mold as it were... It comes and goes in terms of how I consider whether there’s a supernatural element to reality or not. There are times when I’m like, “Oh yeah, definitely, there’s probably something, like, supernatural out there somewhere,” but I’m also extremely, like, scientifically minded. I’m like, “Well, you can’t test it, so it’s just opinion.” That’s not something that’s generally considered compatible with most mainstream Christianity. In, say, Judaism, you can be an atheist and Jewish and religious, and none of those are seen as a contradiction. And that blew my mind when I learned about them. “What do you mean, I thought as a religion, you had to be a theist?” And, you know, my teachers were like, “Not actually. You don’t have to believe in God. You can still study all of these writings and be a part of the community even if you’re not a theist.” And I was like, “Oh! Well, that’s cool.” So you don’t feel like, “Oh no, if I have a difference of opinion, I’m gonna be excommunicated.” Like, “No, we encourage discussion and we want people to debate these things and, in fact, here is a several hundred page volume of people debating. Here you go!” And I love that discourse because it helps me understand other peoples’ perspectives as well as kind of developing my own perspective in light of that. So there are times where I can say I’m absolutely convinced of some sort of godlike figure and
recently I’ve just been in this mindset of “Okay, maybe.” For someone who grew up in an Evangelical household, that would not have been a positive thing. Bryce, too, struggled with rigid interpretations of religious doctrine and found his way into a more affirming branch of Christianity:

I tried over the years, many times, to stay Catholic. But, you know, in the [City] area, especially in the downtown [City] area, the churches are older, more traditional, you know, the big, spired churches, not the modern type of churches, so it draws an older priest. Rarely do you have a younger priest in an inner-city parish. And I always went to the inner-city parishes. And so they’re gonna be old-fashioned and sometimes they would be outright bigoted. And they would say, like, “This is wrong. You can’t do that. There’s no way that homosexuality is just gonna be condoned.” Other times, they would just imply that it’s not the right thing to do. That you should really train yourself to be more normal. And, I just, I just put up with it, you know, basically for a couple of decades. And I just—that’s where I stopped going to church other than maybe Easter and Christmas any longer for a while. And I was feeling that void and I wanted to go back to this other parish. And when he came back and told me that [he would not recognize Bryce and his husband as a couple], I was just done.

Farren cited their growing awareness of LGBTQ+ identity and acceptance through exposure to representation and meeting LGBTQ+ peers outside of their religion-of-origin contributed to their religious conversion:

I was a voracious reader growing up, often in, like, my own little world, not super social with other kids. And that was actually one of the few places I didn’t feel limited. Like, my mom would take me to bookstores and let me just browse around and pick out books
without censoring them really. This was really different from what I was getting at school because the school library would only ever carry, like, “approved” books... I really liked fantasy and sci-fi books and one day I stumbled on a series with a gay main character. Like, it sounds stupid, but Mercedes Lackey literally changed my life. That was some of the first queer rep I saw in anything. Well, that and that one Star Trek episode where there was a same-sex kiss, but I remember the huge uproar that happened with that. I almost lost my Star Trek watching privileges over it. Anyway, seeing that, like, this was a thing and I’m not the only person like this and it’s not 100% lust-based really started to make me question things. I was miserable in that school. I managed to talk my parents into letting me switch to public school for high school and I started to make some friends who were not just not Christian, but also who were actually queer. It was still not perfect and there was definitely some homophobic stuff going on, but it was so much better for me. I ended up secretly converting to Paganism, which my family is still not aware of. They probably never will be... Some of the first friends I made [in high school] happened to be into Wicca, and they kind of introduced me to it. It was so different from what I grew up with. Like, hearing something described as a “thinking person’s religion” really appealed to me... A religion based around nature and love and treating other people well was pretty much a shock. I don’t adhere to, like, the tenets of Wicca because I find a lot of it too formal and rigid for me, but the whole neo-Pagan family of religions is really where I find myself these days.

Morgan also described feeling drawn to the tenets of Paganism, as well as her difficulties navigating divorce and the toxic nature of the religious environment:
Right around the time of my divorce I started noticing a lot of heartbreaking similarities between how I related to my ex-husband and how I was relating to God. There was just a lot of toxic narcissism and, you know, constantly trying to make sure that, you know, I did everything right just so they would still love me. And when I was hurting, I was told, you know, that it was a test or it was, you know, just an opportunity to show how much I’d grown, and I was like, “That’s not love.” If you have the power to help someone who you love that is hurting and you choose not to, I don’t know why you can possibly call that love. And then, you know, I just started kinda working through some of the questions that I hadn’t been allowed to ask growing up. Like, you know, “Why does the God I was raised to believe in claim to be a God of love, but hate gay people?” Ultimately, the conclusion I personally came to was that I could not personally rectify one all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent being because there were just too many contradictions that I was seeing in everyday life. Like, kids born with cancer, incest, rape, you know, just all of these things that were clearly not, like, direct results of bad choices in life. If I had all the power in the universe, I would’ve chosen something else. Or I would’ve created a different system, you know, where, like, “If you wanna be in heaven with me when you die, cool, but if you don’t that’s also okay. You just won’t be with me, but I’m not gonna send you to a place of eternal conscious torment.” You know, things like that were just really hard for me to rectify with the whole “love” thing. And once I started recognizing, like, “It’s okay to call this out because it isn’t love,” the whole system just kinda crumbled for me... I’d say I’m still kinda seeking, but not in a way that feels urgent. I have a spiritual practice where I’m, like, open, but I don’t have anything clearly defined
at this point. Like, I do still believe that there’s some higher power, and I find a lot of the
tenets of Paganism really attractive because it’s an
earth-based, respect for nature and all life kinda thing and I can really get behind that.
The environmentalist in me is very into that. And it’s kinda basically, “Everything can
boil down to just be a decent human. Be a kind person and love other people and do the
best you can. Speak up for social issues and activists and environmental activism.” But
apart from that, you know, it’s a very peaceful, kind, like, truly gracious place to be
where there’s no one right way to do everything. As long as what you are doing brings
you peace, joy, and fulfillment without causing yourself or anyone else harm, it’s valid
and it’s good, and that’s kinda the approach I’m taking to spirituality now... I feel like
any religion that has a longer list of rules than... I don’t know. It just feels like the more
rules you add, the further away from kindness and love and compassion you get. Because
if you’re governed by love, compassion, and kindness, those values are just gonna flow
naturally. And it’s not gonna be because of guilt, fear, or shame. It’s gonna be because
you recognize the value of human life or of life in general and you’re gonna want to
honor that by, you know, being kind and by respecting the earth, and, you know, doing
your part to help your community and things like that. So I feel like if you get back to the
values rather than the rules, those things actually kinda flow naturally.

Loss and Mourning

Participants suffered a variety of losses following their decisions to convert to a new
religion or to leave religion behind altogether. These were seen most commonly with regard to
the responses of family members, friends, and their former religious communities. Many
participants also struggled with the loss of what had previously given their lives meaning. As
Morgan put it: “My whole life, my whole purpose and meaning was wrapped up within it.”

Heath endured the loss of nearly every aspect of his previous life:

When I came out, I lost everybody... I have three friends from college and two friends from when I was younger than that who have stuck with me. And one cousin, as far as my extended family goes. And nobody else. Like, that’s it. I lost all my family, friends, the rest of my relatives; that’s it. I don’t have anything else and that’s exclusively because they all hold to this extraordinarily stringent, you know, extremist viewpoint where they can’t even be involved in my life at all, let alone close. You know, there’s no, like, difference of opinion. It’s just, you are now an anathema. The end. And that’s, you know, so for me coming out as queer was a decision to lose everything and to... including my siblings, including... I mean, in some ways it’s the least of my problems, but, you know, also I’m quite certain I’ve been written out of my family’s will and stuff like that...Which, you know, it’s one of the only ways for millennials to get any decent amount of money. Frankly, at this point, right, like, that’s a big deal. Like, you know, we weren’t rich rich, but we, you know, my parents have some money and there will be some money when they pass. I’m not getting, there’s no way I’m... so like, like, it created...the religion created this environment where to do this and to be this I literally had to start over from scratch. I lost my career; I lost everything.

While Shannon has not entirely lost contact with her family members, she is now kept at a distance: “I have my own circle of friends and a life outside my family and... I’m definitely one of those wedding/funeral family members. And that seems to be what works best for most everybody.”
Farren, along with a few other participants, is not “out” to some of their family members for fear of these sorts of losses:

I don’t think I could take the anger or the sad faces, like, “Oh no, you’re going to hell.” It’s like a weird kind of pity or concern that they get for the unsaved. It’s hard to even describe to someone who hasn’t seen it. It’s like a huge, invisible distance has opened up between you. It’s wild. I anticipate the same thing if I ever come out to my family...

Some of my family has become less conservative over the years, but it’s hard to know what bits they still hang onto. Like I said, for some reason being gay is one of the big sins. Some would probably be okay, but others definitely wouldn’t. And a lot I can’t really predict. So, like, I just don’t bring it up. They already think I’m a heathen for defending gay and trans rights and being an evil liberal communist or whatever. For some reason it doesn’t even occur to them that I’m one of those scary gays. I really don’t know if I ever will [come out to them]. Maybe at my wedding.

**Mental Health Treatment**

Many participants have engaged with professional mental health services in order to help them address the aftermath of their religious upbringings. Morgan shared:

I’ve significantly decreased the number of, like, trauma responses that I have in relation to the religious abuse, and now I’m just trying to just recognize it for what it is. And through therapy I’m trying to work up some tools to respond more appropriately when I am triggered.

Alana, too, described that she has had positive experiences with past therapy and an ongoing medication regimen:
[I] have a lot of good support in my life and have built a lot of, like, put a lot of tools in my toolbox from over the years having had access [to therapy], you know. At least I have my meds, which keep me going strong and just kind of like being... exercising awareness of, like, when I am acting a certain way or feeling a certain way, and working to kind of self-soothe and self-care as much as I can.

Heath has been involved in extensive mental health treatment over the years, both as a result of his religious experiences and history of familial abuse:

I’ve been in therapy for a decade. I’ve been, let’s see, I’ve been hospitalized for mental health issues twice. I’m under psychiatric care...I’m trying, in this conversation, to differentiate between, like, what the religion did and what my family did—cuz I had an extraordinarily abusive family situation—but certainly I still use a lot of this to deal with a lot of the PTSD from the family stuff. But I absolutely have part of my PTSD from the religion stuff, so, you know, dealing with, you know, just trying to get my brain back to a place where it can accept that I’m not constantly in danger, either from my family or from God and the church. And all of the guilt and manipulation tactics... It’s all kind of together.

Tara noted that, despite being engaged in therapy, she has yet to discuss her religious past with a therapist:

You know what—I think I may have asked for therapy, like, on everything except for that. And the one time, like, any kind of romantic or sexual topic came up, it was with a therapist that I just didn’t click with, so I wasn’t comfortable enough. That’s probably something I should look into. I’ve had to deal with this on my own, you know, with like
the help of the internet. I can read this article and understand why I’m feeling this thing and now I’m realizing... wait. Maybe I should actually bring this up to my therapist.

Oliver shared that he has had success with therapy in the past and is in the process of transferring to a new therapist in order to work on additional issues:

The reason why I was saying, “Oh, I’m not seeing ‘em now,” is because my therapist, after, you know, um, has recommended another therapist to deal with some other issues. Cuz I think that definitely different therapists have different skill sets and areas that they focus on. But I would say she was really good in sort of helping me work through a lot of my religious-based trauma and thinking about the world.

**Spiritual Resources**

Participants who converted to another faith, or who are exploring their spirituality in other ways, often cited their spiritual beliefs or guiding moral codes to be great sources of support in their journey to recovery from their experiences. Farren explained that, even though their access to formal mental health treatment is limited, their spiritual resources have been invaluable:

I’ve been in therapy on and off over the years. Mostly off. It gets expensive and my insurance sucks. But mostly, I think, my spirituality helps me get through a lot of it. Even though I still get those panic flashes that I’m going to be judged or go to hell.

Bryce described a sense of relief and comfort now that he and his husband have found a church to which they can belong:

It’s just more comfortable and convenient to follow a pastor that I think is kind and generous and has a good heart and has the right meaning. And that’s what I finally have found in the Congregational church that I belong to with that pastor. I would’ve put up
with it again at the Catholic church if the pastor had been a little more kind-hearted. But he wasn’t. And I wasn’t going to stand for that any longer. I’m too old for that.

Heath shared that he finds his neo-Pagan spiritual beliefs to be supportive of his mental health and sense of well-being:

Part of the reason I fell into magic and stuff was actually looking for ways to deal with my CPTSD symptoms in a more in-depth way. So I use a lot of things out of that world, like journeying work and other types of things that are usually considered, like, shamanistic practices to try to deal with my shit.

Devon has also found comfort in their neo-Pagan beliefs:

I feel like, whether I’m practicing by myself or with other people, I feel like with Paganism, I’m more supported than I ever was before. Like, I don’t have that constant fear of whether I’m gonna mess up and get punished forever for something. Especially something that’s just part of me. Finding a religion that’s about love and not judging other people has made a huge difference in my life. And it gives me something I can draw on when I’m struggling that really gives me hope in a way I didn’t have before.

Oliver explained that his “open” approach to religion and spirituality following his departure from Christianity has helped him to achieve a sense of contentment and peace. He also shared his concerns with organized religion and his belief that the cycle of religious abuse is self-perpetuating:

I would describe myself as agnostic, if people ask. And if people ask for more detail? I think it’s very much wanting to be in touch with what’s around me, and spirituality and nature and the divine and... just experiences... It’s kind of just being, like, one... And living in the moment, and feeling God. Cuz I don’t mind saying “God,” you know, cuz if,
for example, I’m at my parents’ place—and my parents know I’m no longer religious—but, you know, or there’s some need to pray, I’m happy to say, you know, pray to God, creator of the universe, or creation itself, you know. I don’t know. He, she, they, whatever they are. I kind of have this conceptualization of God being just a present being. And it’s not based on anything. And I think that’s fine. You know... I think that the main thing now that I really appreciate, you know, I was so scared of there being no answer, and now I think it’s really great that there’s this potential entity, this question about creation that there’s no answer for. I don’t think that’s scary anymore. I used to think it would’ve been really scary if there wasn’t an answer. Now I think it’s, it’s like, what are the chances we’re all here? That I’m talking to you, you know? It’s just, I think there’s something really beautiful in not having an answer to everything and being open to what spiritualities are there and spirits and other things, you know. Things we don’t understand... It’s good. And for the things that we can understand, science can take us so far, but you don’t just put your theological God there as the gap. I think it’s cool to have a gap there. And it’s great, and as humans we should keep learning as far as we need to, but there are things we don’t understand. And I think I’m just at a real comfortable place in that. And sort of the fluidity of that allows me to kind of experience a lot of things, you know? And be more chill with it. And that comes down to sexuality and just understanding my race and my roots better. Ironically, even though like, understanding, wait a minute, of course, before colonialism there were actual, you know, religions and beliefs. And, you know, it wasn’t just a savage belief, it was like a system. And often, you know, not always, but often, you know, these were more lenient towards, like, nature and defining the natural. And I think that learning about that was cool to understand. And
so I would say I’m very open to religion and... No, I’m sorry, I say I’m very open to spirituality and very close-minded when it comes to organized religion. I don’t really have much... I’m not going to protest against it or believe some people are unintelligent who believe in it, because I believe there is some intelligent people who are religious, of course there are. But it’s just like, I’m just, I have no patience for those systems that actively try and control people. And not every organized religion does that, but a lot of them, whether subtly or very overtly, try and control. And I’ve been the victim of that. But I use the word “victim,” but then I’m thinking... the thing with the church really is that it’s victims creating more victims. You know, I’ve also, I talk about organized religion, how I have no patience for it, but then I also feel very sorry at the same time for people who are caught up in it a lot of the times. Because I’m like, well, unless you’re an obvious grifter, which there are those that exist, you as well have been, are letting your life be controlled by this particular toxic belief. And are spreading that to others.

**Community Building**

In addition to mental health treatment and spiritual resources, participants also cited new communities as essential means of support. Farren described the importance of their support network:

A lot of it is also just like, having really great friends. I feel like I have a really great chosen family of people I can rely on and who accept me unconditionally. And I don’t have to worry about fucking up or not fitting into these strict rules for who I’m supposed to be.

Morgan remarked on the important role that social media and internet communities can play in building new support networks for those who have converted or left their
religions-of-origin:

There’s actually a lot of Facebook groups for people who have come from similar backgrounds and so, like, finding a new community of people who have, like, broken from their religious upbringing and are, like, kinda processing all of that trauma and also, like, redefining their moral compasses and their values in life. It’s been very cathartic to, like, find others who are in that boat because that’s one of the first losses I felt after leaving the religious organization. It was, you know, if you’re encouraged to stay within that group then when you leave, you don’t really know how to relate to people on the outside in healthy ways. And that loss of community can be a really harsh hit. And then finding all these other people who have gone through similar things really kinda helped rebuild that community for me.

Oliver noted that both in-person supports and online social groups have been helpful:

Following some of the more deconstruction movements and everything else and working through that and talking to people. I’ve got a couple of friends who are in very similar boats… the friends who also stepped away from religion who I have kept in contact with. And there’s only two outside of, like, the Facebook groups and other things that are on there, but there’s only two that I regularly see. And, um, having other people who have been through a similar experience is also good.

Devon, too, described their support network as consisting of both online communities and in-person supports:

My mum is both a huge support for me, but she’s also, like, not super clear how she feels about [Devon’s sexual orientation and gender identity]. It’s a bit weird to describe someone who misgenders me all the time as a support, but here we are. I find a lot of
support from the online communities on Facebook and Twitter and Discord. Like, I’ve built some friendships there that are just as close as some of the ones I’ve got in real life. The majority of my friends from before, like, I’m not in contact with since they’re still in it. So like, my current group of friends is pretty small, but we’re really close. And, like, having people I can depend on who aren’t, maybe, necessarily coming from the same place I did, but who are true supports and who are willing to be there for me when I need it is a lot more meaningful to me than what I have with my family. Cuz like, I know a lot of them that I’m not out to would probably just cut me off. It’s hard for me to trust people who are all like, “Yeah, we’re here for you, whatever you need,” but also would think I’m a sinner and going to hell if they knew I was queer. Like, nah, that doesn’t work for me. I trust the family I’ve built out of friends I’ve made, and that’s the people who are really there for me and are willing to put themselves out there to support and protect me. Like, that’s real love; that’s my real family.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Religion and spirituality play important roles in the lives of people throughout the world. Despite this importance, relatively little attention has been paid to the potential for religion to have negative impacts. A growing body of research suggests that adverse religious experiences (AREs) may have far-reaching consequences with regards to the mental health and well-being of those who experience them. The current study explored the ways in which LGBTQ+ individuals are affected by AREs across the lifespan. The results of this study suggest that AREs are regular occurrences for LGBTQ+ individuals who were raised in authoritarian religious environments and that these experiences often lead to a variety of negative psychosocial outcomes. These outcomes are reflected in the statistical analyses, which indicated that participants felt they were negatively impacted by the disaffirming beliefs and doctrines of their religions-of-origin, and within the interview themes, which explored a broad array of AREs and their sequelae. This chapter will revisit each of the research questions raised, summarize the results of this study, and discuss the clinical implications of these findings.

Quantitative Discussion

Frequency of AREs

The results of this study suggest that exposure to AREs is widespread for LGBTQ+ individuals. While the sample size and non-normal distribution of the survey data limit the conclusiveness and generalizability of these findings for the population as a whole, results for the individuals studied were extreme. Ninety-six percent of all participants reported that they had suffered at least one ARE in their lifetimes. Given the potential impacts and psychological sequelae of AREs, the prevalence of ARE exposure within the sample is alarming.
Classifications and Impacts of AREs

Participants reported AREs occurring in several contexts, most of which fell within the following categories: within the home or family, within personal relationships, in a religious building (e.g., churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, etc.), within religious communities, or in religious schools. Participants also described incidents which took place within the workplace or as the result of exposure to religious media. These results suggest that exposure to AREs is a risk for LGBTQ+ individuals in many aspects of their lives. The nature and lifetime impacts of AREs were explored more extensively through qualitative methods, which are summarized in the Qualitative Discussion section of this chapter.

Disaffirming Religious Doctrine

Most participants (89.60%) indicated that they had been impacted by the negative or disaffirming LGBTQ+ beliefs or doctrines expressed by their religions-of-origin. Results of this study suggest that the negative impacts do ameliorate over time, with participants reporting less negative impacts as adults than as youths. Negative or disaffirming LGBTQ+ beliefs or doctrines were found to be strongly correlated with participants’ ratings of both youth and adult impacts. Additionally, negative youth impact ratings were strongly correlated with negative adult impact ratings, suggesting that negative impacts, though they are lessened, still persist for adults.

Change Efforts

Just over half of study participants (51.45%) reported that they had either considered or engaged in sexual orientation or gender identity change efforts. Most change efforts could be categorized in one of the following domains: behavioral change, conversion therapy, counseling, or prayer or religious ritual. The vast majority of these change efforts were self-initiated. Given
the strong correlation between negative or disaffirming LGBTQ+ beliefs or doctrines, it is possible that this finding reflects an internalization of these harmful messages.

**Current Religion/Spirituality**

Participants rated religion or spirituality as important during their upbringings. However, the majority (65.32%) reported that they no longer engage with any religion or spiritual tradition as adults. Of those that still describe themselves as religious or spiritual, only 23.33% remain within their religion-of-origin (8.09% of all participants). Those who engage in some religious or spiritual practice as adults also rated religion/spirituality as significantly less important in their everyday lives. While the survey did not directly address the question of why participants are no longer religious/spiritual, it seems likely that disaffirming religious doctrine and/or the frequency of AREs for LGBTQ+ individuals may be contributing factors.

**Qualitative Discussion**

The interviews conducted for this study allowed participants to describe their experiences in considerable detail. Each participant approached the interview questions with great openness and vulnerability. As they shared their histories, AREs, and mental health challenges, many clinically relevant and deeply moving discussions occurred. The participants’ own words convey the intensity and impacts of their experiences more effectively than any summary could. As such, lengthy segments of the transcribed interview responses were included within the Results section of this study. In this way, their testimonies can be preserved and made available as a resource for others.

Thematic network analysis of participant interviews yielded several global themes: the authoritarian environments in which participants were reared, the disaffirming religious doctrine to which they were subjected, the social impacts of their experiences, the psychological impacts
of their experiences, the impacts of AREs, their experiences of change and loss following religious conversion, and their efforts to heal from their negative experiences. In this section, the interview data is summarized and explored through the lens of these global themes.

**Psychological Impacts**

Participants described various mental health challenges over the course of their lives, many of which they ascribe to messages internalized during as a result of their religious upbringings. Depression, guilt, and anxiety were the issues most frequently discussed, but loneliness, grief, hopelessness, decreased sense of self-worth or self-esteem, nightmares, flashbacks, disrupted sleep, and sexual dysfunction were also present for participants. For some, these symptoms abated gradually as they grew older and distanced themselves from their religions-of-origin. For many, however, symptoms persisted well into adulthood. More than half of the participants interviewed reported that they currently experience mental health symptoms that they believe are the direct result of AREs.

**Authoritarian Environments**

All but one of the interview participants described religions-of-origin that may be described as authoritarian religious environments. These environments often discouraged critical thinking, questioning, and the use of reason in favor of reliance on faith, belief, and the teachings of the religious group. These groups tended to isolate themselves from outside influences and sources of information. Unlike the stereotypical “cult,” however, this isolation was more frequently accomplished through social rather than physical distancing from the majority culture. While members of religious groups would work outside of the community, it was rare for members to form close friendships with co-workers or other outsiders. This was typically framed as a separation from the “world” or “worldly” people that is spiritually beneficial for members.
For instance, Evangelical Christians may be encouraged to prioritize “fellowship” with other Christians in order to facilitate their spiritual growth. Excessive time spent with non-religious acquaintances, friends, or, at times, family members may be discouraged due to their “worldly influence,” which may lead a Christian to “backslide” (i.e., move backwards in their spiritual journey towards the ideal of “holiness,” or living a “Christ-like” life free of sin).

This emphasis on maintaining distance from the secular world often leads members of religious communities to seek out private religious schools or homeschooling opportunities. Both of these educational options allow parents and religious leadership the freedom to censor educational materials and further limit access to outside information. Unchecked, these educational options also open the door to religiously motivated disinformation with regards to science and sexual health, especially the so-called “divisive topics” of sexual orientation, gender identity, and racism. Participant narratives included numerous examples of these efforts to control access to information during their religious upbringings.

Some participants described religious communities that went beyond limited meaningful contact with people outside of the group. These groups emphasized opposition to outside authority, belief in conspiracy theories, mistrust of the government, and, at times, stockpiling of weapons and survival equipment. This focus on a clear “us versus them” dichotomy also extends to their involvement in politics where these groups seek to advance laws and policies consistent with their political beliefs. Marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ people provide a clear “target” for political activism given the black-and-white, fundamentalist perspective on LGBTQ+ existence espoused by many authoritarian religious groups. The negative beliefs regarding LGBTQ+ people, combined with their minority status, likely contributes to the apparent
frequency with which LGBTQ+ individuals are subjected to AREs within authoritarian religious communities.

**Disaffirming Religious Doctrine**

Disaffirming religious doctrine is one of the most prevalent AREs discussed. For all but one of the interview participants, the doctrines of their religions-of-origins were disaffirming in nature. These religions-of-origin varied widely in their responses to LGBTQ+ community members. As an example of this contrast, Bryce was informed that he and his husband would not be recognized as a couple, but both Shannon and Eliza were subjected to religious rites intended to “cure” them. Disaffirming religious doctrines often translated directly to AREs for participants. The majority of participants stated that their religion-of-origins’ attitudes regarding LGBTQ+ people were most often conveyed via their families or social contacts rather than directly from religious leaders.

The LGBTQ+ doctrines of most of the participants’ religions-of-origin were remarkably consistent. Only heterosexual and cisgender identities were recognized and accepted. Homosexuality was typically viewed through a behavioral lens rather than as a natural orientation. Within most of these frameworks, homosexual behavior constituted an active choice to turn from the “pure” or “natural” intention of God. As such, these behaviors were viewed as correctable through faith and dedication to spiritual growth. When participants were unable to change themselves in this way, many described feeling increased guilt, hopelessness, and shame in the face of their perceived “failure.” As Eliza shared, “I did everything they asked me to... and they were basically saying, ‘You’re not trying hard enough. If you loved your family, you would try hard enough.’” This inability to achieve faith-based change to their sexual orientations and/or gender identities was a source of significant distress for some participants. Similar to
these perspectives on sexual orientation, gender identity was viewed through a behavioral lens in most of participants’ religions-of-origin. It was most frequently discussed in terms of “a man dressed like a woman” and a sexual motive was presumed. Here, too, the language of perversion versus the pure or natural intent of the divine was frequently invoked.

Participants’ reported that threats of punishment, both in the physical world and in the afterlife, were commonplace throughout their upbringings. Most of the participants were exposed to the threat of eternal punishment in hell, either in words or in imagery. Some participants shared that they were exposed to media or performances depicting graphic scenes of violence and torture from a young age in order to convey the reality of hell. Others were taught by family or religious community members that LGBTQ+ people deserved to commit suicide or be executed.

Social Impacts

Participants discussed a variety of ways in which they felt their social skills, identity development, and/or ability to navigate the secular world were impacted by their authoritarian religious pasts. The most frequently cited issues for participants were the lack of meaningful contact with LGBTQ+ peers and the lack of access to accurate information with regards to LGBTQ+ topics. Participants felt as though they reached adulthood ill-equipped to interact with others outside of their religions-of-origin, especially with members of the LGBTQ+ community. Some participants shared past interactions with LGBTQ+ peers during which they were confused, rude, or cruel, which they now deeply regret. Others felt unprepared for their entry into the dating world, since their understanding of romantic relationships had been shaped by their religious environment. The limited access to accurate knowledge regarding sexual health and
LGBTQ+ topics frequently left participants to their own devices, which, on occasion, placed some participants in precarious situations.

**ARE Impacts**

All interview participants discussed at least one ARE in their narratives. While many of these occurred in youth, some took place after participants reached adulthood. Almost half of the interview participants reported that they had experienced physical or sexual abuse within their authoritarian religious environments—either within their family or at the hands of a member of their religious community. In addition to these instances of abuse, participants reported an array of AREs throughout their narratives. While it would be impossible to list each and every ARE that these participants have experienced throughout their lifetimes, many of the other AREs discussed fall within one of the following categories: exposure to disaffirming or bigoted religious doctrine, abusive or manipulative religious practices, exposure to disinformation, negative interactions with clergy, negative interactions with community members or peers, negative interactions with family, rejection/removal from religious communities or families, conversion efforts (including religious rituals), and threats of hell or punishment (at times accompanied by graphic imagery).

AREs discussed in participant narratives tended to be recurrent and regularly reinforced by additional similar or identical AREs. In this respect, as well as in their psychological impacts, AREs are consistent with developmental trauma and its sequelae. As previously discussed, cumulative experiences of developmental trauma are now thought to lead to the development of CPTSD. Chronic exposure to AREs has, for most interview participants, created toxic and psychologically abusive environments during their upbringings.
None of the interview participants chose to remain in their religions-of-origin. Some participants decided to abandon religion entirely, but others have converted to LGBTQ+ affirming religions or spiritualities. Participants cited a variety of reasons for their departures, but the most common were conflicts between critical thinking and the authoritarian nature of the faith, exposure to outside information and/or contact with LGBTQ+ peers, discomfort with disaffirming LGBTQ+ doctrines, religious communities’ attitudes regarding gender and sexual assault, growing awareness of the abusive or manipulative nature of the environment, or a combination of other AREs. Of the 10 interview participants who were reared in Evangelical Christian environments, none chose to remain within the Christian faith. Of these, four have moved towards neo-Pagan faiths, one has converted to Judaism, and the others identify as agnostic or atheist. Bryce and Quinn, who were brought up Catholic and Unitarian Universalist, respectively, are now members of LGBTQ+ affirming Mainline Protestant denominations.

Participants reported that they experienced grief, sadness, and loneliness following their departures from their religions-of-origin. This was especially true in the cases of participants who lost contact with their families and support networks that remain embedded within their former religious communities. Without these supports, participants often struggled to cope with the mental health sequelae of their experiences. Many have experienced extended periods of mourning for their previous lives and loved ones. Many participants also struggled with a profound loss of meaning. As Valerie summarized, “When so much of your life and purpose is wrapped up in [your religion], if you leave it behind, you leave your sense of meaning too.” Fortunately, interview participants have illustrated incredible resiliency by developing new coping skills, supports, communities, and senses of meaning. Some participants have also
managed to maintain relationships with their religious family members, though they report that these relationships are sometimes strained or distant.

**Healing**

Participants shared various strategies for healing from AREs and other negative experiences. The majority of participants have engaged in therapy or counseling at some point since their departures from their religions-of-origin. While some participants acknowledged that they have struggled to find a therapist that was “the right fit” for working with their religious traumas, all felt as though therapy had been helpful in their journeys to recovery. This appears to be true even for participants who did not elect to discuss their AREs directly with their therapists. For those who have done specific therapeutic work targeting their religious trauma, they report that they have made significant gains with regards to their symptoms and ability to cope with stressful life events.

Participants who chose to convert to another religion or spiritual path reported that their spirituality has been a source of strength. Participants spoke of the difference engagement with a non-authoritarian form of religion or spirituality has made in their lives. Themes of love, acceptance, and peace were common in participants’ descriptions of their new spiritual paths. For those involved in new religious communities, fellow members or practitioners have helped them to form new support networks. The development of new support networks, both physical and via the internet, were cited by participants as being an important factor with regards to coping with their negative experiences. This was especially true when participants were able to connect with others who have endured AREs.
Clinical Implication

The clinical implications of religious trauma and the aftermath of AREs are numerous. These individuals have often lived within an authoritarian religious environment for years, if not a lifetime. Dogmatic, fundamentalist beliefs frequently target LGBTQ+ individuals as uniquely flawed, sinful, or perverted, and this perspective makes LGBTQ+ youths within these environments likely to become victims of AREs. While these experiences, combined with other factors, may lead LGBTQ+ individuals to eventually leave their authoritarian religions-of-origin, they nevertheless “may be going through the shattering of a personally meaningful faith and/or breaking away from a controlling community and lifestyle” (Winell, 2016a, What is RTS? section, para. 2). Though their status as LGBTQ+ individuals may make them more likely to experience AREs, they are no less likely to feel a profound sense of loss as they break away from their former religious communities. In addition to the sense of loss and adjustment difficulties that may come from leaving behind an authoritarian environment, these individuals also experience symptoms associated with chronic, developmental trauma and CPTSD. On top of the traumatic experiences they have endured, they may also be experiencing a type of “betrayal trauma” after being harmed by those they trusted. As Cashwell and Swindle (2018) explained, “Trauma may be amplified as the victims were betrayed by the sacred system they thought would comfort them, and where they likely expected protection, acceptance, and positive experiences” (p. 185). Survivors have also likely internalized negative beliefs regarding human sexuality, gender role expectations, and sexual purity.

One defining characteristic of religious trauma may be the sense of ongoing existential fear. In other acute or chronic traumas, when a survivor is safe and removed from the dangerous situation, there exists a discrete endpoint after which the threat no longer exists (e.g., a survivor
may recover from a violent assault or leave an abusive partner, etc.). While it may take years or decades for a survivor to reach the point at which they can once again feel safe, the specific threat has ended. However, in the case of religious trauma, threats of divine judgment or eternal punishment are not always removed when the survivor leaves the traumatogenic environment. As described in the in-depth interviews, a lingering sense of self-doubt or fear that spiritual threats may be real persists for some participants. This sense of ongoing existential fear may add unique considerations to treatment. For these survivors, the threat has not been entirely removed and, given the impossibility of spiritual certainty, may never be extinguished. As Samah Jabr noted, there is a significant difference between coping with trauma from past threats and living with the persistent anticipation of future trauma: “There is no ‘post’ because the trauma is repetitive and ongoing and continuous” (as cited in Goldhill, 2019). While Jabr spoke of the horrific ongoing trauma faced by the Palestinian people, this perspective on continuous trauma may be helpful in understanding the survivors of religious trauma who were conditioned throughout their lives to fear a future of eternal torment.

Mental health professionals may underestimate or fail to comprehend the magnitude of the impacts of AREs and religious trauma, including the existential fear of spiritual punishment. While the data is less clear for other practicing clinicians, a survey of approximately 1,500 full-time professors of psychology at colleges and universities in the United States, 50% identified as atheist, and another 11% as agnostic (Gross & Simmons, 2009). Similarly, psychiatrists have been found to be the least religious of physicians (Curlin et al., 2007). Many psychologists and other mental health professionals do not originate from an authoritarian religious background. This, combined with the research emphasis on spirituality as a beneficial support for patients, leads many clinicians to view religion as a benign influence on their
patients’ lives. Religion and spirituality are considered integral parts of multicultural competence within the field of psychology, but “psychologists receive little or no training in R/S issues” (Vieten & Lukoff, 2022, p. 26). Many non-religious clinicians are, as a result, ill-prepared to address these topics in psychotherapy and those who come from similar authoritarian religious backgrounds may be hesitant to draw on their own experience for fear of excessive self-disclosure or transference issues. While religious/spiritual competencies and training guidelines have been proposed, until they are implemented, it falls upon clinicians to educate themselves with regards to religion, spirituality, and the potential impact of religious trauma (Vieten et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, at this stage much of the little that is known about the treatment of ARE sequelae and religious trauma is based on anecdotal evidence from clinicians in the field. There exists no standardized treatment protocol for religious trauma. However, many clinicians report success with methods typically utilized to treat other forms of developmental trauma and CTPSD. Effective treatment focuses on identification of triggers, development of coping strategies, decreasing symptoms, and supporting survivors as they mourn and make new meaning. Cognitive processing therapy (CPT), trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), narrative exposure therapy (NET), and prolonged exposure therapy (PE) are manualized treatments that have been used in the treatment of religious trauma by clinicians operating from a variety of theoretical orientations and therapeutic lenses. Research into the treatment of religious trauma and its outcomes may be in its infancy, but survivors describe quality therapeutic relationships which emphasize acceptance, understanding, and unconditional positive regard as integral to success.
Limitations

There are several limitations inherent in this study. The first is that of selection bias, in that, participants who chose to complete the survey or volunteer for an interview may hold unusually strong views regarding their religious upbringings. This may mean that their results are less generalizable to the LGBTQ+ population as a whole. Additionally, the affirming or disaffirming nature of religious environments, as well as their level of authoritarianism, is subjective and difficult to operationalize, requiring the study to rely on participants’ personal perceptions rather than a clear, objective distinction. With regards to the survey portion of this study, the quantitative analysis was limited by the number of participants, resulting in a higher (7.5%) margin of error and limiting the use of more robust parametric analyses. Participants over the age of 45 were poorly represented within the study sample. Participants were predominately white Christians located in the United States, which may make it difficult to generalize results to other demographics and fail to take into account the impacts of intersecting identities. The qualitative methodology used, thematic network analysis, may have overlooked or obscured details or nuances in the themes which are salient for participants. Finally, participants were recruited via the internet and social media, which may have limited the input of those who are unable to utilize that technology.

Future Research

The heavily skewed results of this study raise an important question: What caused the overwhelmingly negative reports regarding participants’ religious upbringings? Was it, perhaps, the consequence of a biased sample? Or are they a testament to the prevalence of adverse religious experiences? At this stage, it is impossible to know whether this study attracted a specific subgroup of the LGBTQ+ population or if it exposed a deeper, broader set of concerns.
Further research is necessary to better understand the prevalence and implications of such a potentially widespread phenomenon. It is vital that future research continues to explore the impacts of authoritarian religious upbringings and AREs on those affected. There are countless opportunities to expand research in this area, including an expansion of the demographic and diagnostic sampling of the current study. Quantifying the percentage of the LGBTQ+ population reared in authoritarian religious environments or who have experienced AREs would be an invaluable tool for researchers who wish to understand the generalizability of the data. Further research into the nature, frequency, and prevalence of AREs would allow for a greater understanding of religious trauma among both clinicians and the general population. Research into the most effective treatment for addressing symptoms would facilitate therapists’ efforts to assist patients as they rebuild their lives. Perhaps most important of all, further research would honor the experiences of survivors and demonstrate that they are neither alone nor forgotten.

**Conclusion**

AREs and religious trauma are phenomena that affect an unknown number of individuals, but the results of this study suggest that most LGBTQ+ individuals who were reared in religious or spiritual environments have endured at least one ARE in their lifetimes. LGBTQ+ individuals reared in authoritarian religious environments are particularly susceptible to AREs. Disaffirming religious doctrine, while certainly a driving force, is just one of many contributing factors to the development of religious trauma in LGBTQ+ individuals. These survivors experience symptoms consistent with other forms of developmental trauma and CPTSD, but their histories of AREs may be overlooked or dismissed by clinicians unfamiliar with the profundity of religion or spirituality in the lives of patients. One distinctive feature of religious trauma, an ongoing sense
of existential fear of future punishment, may persist in some survivors and affect symptom presentation. For survivors to be best supported by clinicians, increased understanding of religion and spiritual issues, as well as the nature of religious trauma, is vital.
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