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Cults and the LGBTQ Community: A Systematic Review Using PRISMA

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Abstract

For individuals in the LGBTQ community, the thought of religion or religious groups usually elicit some reaction. There are many both mainstream and fringe groups that have strong, anti-LGBTQ viewpoints. This often is hard for someone who was raised religious and finds comfort in the church. The purpose of the current research was to conduct a structured literature review on academic literature exploring a connection between LGBTQ and cults. I used the PRISMA methodology to examine this topic. While there were some interesting findings, I was unable to find extensive connections between the topics, especially in regards to cults. The findings of my research suggest that most the religious institutions explored have anti-LGBTQ views. These views can create communities not accepting of LGBTQ individuals, and, in turn, have often made LGBTQ individuals turn away from the church. There is hope, and we are seeing many more mainstream religious groups become increasing accepting of the LGBTQ community.

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Anti-gay activist Reverend Fred Phelps, Sr. was well known in the Midwest during the 1990s and 2000s. He was the leader of the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) in Topeka, Kansas, and protested funerals of AIDS victims, U.S. soldiers, and other events across the country (SPLC, n.d.). Phelps and the WBC became notorious for their protests which often included vulgar signs depicting LGBTQ sexual actions (Brouwer & Hess, 2007; Östling, 2021; SPLC, n.d.).

The WBC was a small congregation made up of mostly Phelps family members (FBI, 2003). Surrounded by a privacy fence, the church resembled a compound. The WBC was religiously mostly aligned with Primitive Baptism (Östling, 2021).

It saw itself as being ‘the only contemporary group that accurately understands and lives out God’s commands’ (Barrett-Fox, 2011, p. 43).

From the moment Phelps and WBC began its protests, they started receiving threats (FBI, 2003). Protestors would film their protests for protection. Even the FBI kept periodic records on WBC activity for intelligence purposes (FBI, 2003).

While not as strong as WBC, most mainstream religious organizations have strong views against members of the LGBTQ community. (As a point of clarification, this manuscript uses “gay” and “LGBTQ” as inclusive terms to represent the entire spectrum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and other individuals.). As of 2022, the United Methodist Church—a large Protestant religious collective with membership over 10 million—is even moving toward a split over the issue of LGBTQ acceptance (Press, 2022).

Just as some religions are moving toward acceptance, other groups have a long way to go. An estimated seven hundred thousand Americans have participated in sexual orientation change efforts AKA conversion therapy (Bracken, 2020). This is not a strictly American issue, as support for gay conversion therapy in Brazil was very strong as recently as 2020 (Tenório de Souza et al., 2022).

Even beyond the draconian conversion therapy practices, many current evangelical Christians continue to condemn the LGBTQ community (Neumann, 2022). Neumann (2022) sees this as potentially changing as younger evangelicals become leaders. There is also a growing movement of “Christian and gay” support resources like *The Reformation Project* and *Joel Speaks Out* (Barrett, 2021; Vines, n.d.).

The purpose of this research was to conduct a structured literature review of articles regarding cults and the LGBTQ movement. Given the often polarized or fringe viewpoints of cults, I expected to find extensive literature on the subject.

Method

I completed a literature search of research discussing cults and LGBTQ terms. I carried out the search using the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist (Moher et al., 2009). I searched the following databases: a) Web of Science, b) PsychInfo, c) EBSCO, d) MEDLINE, and e) National Association of Social Services Workers (NASW) abstract database. I conducted searches through special reserves of the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). I also searched using Google to find any other article not already identified.

I used the inclusive search terms: *lgbt* + cult**, *gay* + cult**, *lesbian* + cult**, *bisexual* + cult**, *transgender* + cult**, and *queer* + cult**. The initial searches through the above databases yielded 3,335 total results, with only 1,679 being unique. Using guidelines of PRISMA, I went through these articles but found a dirge of academic information on the subject. Therefore, this literature review begins by examining religion and the LGBTQ community, then it culminates into the information about cults.

As a disclaimer: The inclusion of various religious groups below does not mean that I am identifying the group as a 'cult'. The articles below were sourced by using 'cult' as a search term.

Religion and the LGBTQ Community

The church and religion is often looked upon as a source of strength for people (Anonymous, 2016; Ball, 2019; Chakravarty et al., 2022; Chakravarty & English, 2021; Eichel, 2017; Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021). Right or wrong, clergy and other religious leaders shape the views of congregants on ambiguous matters (Burack, 2014; Kirby et al., 2017; Perry & Snawder, 2016). Some congregants' interpretations or misinterpretations of religious texts or "traditional" views on marriage can complicate matters (Kirby et al., 2017; Townsley, 2013). Townsley (2013) argued some Biblical passages used to condemn homosexuality are actually misinterpreted. Kirby et al. (2017) found some religious people are more accepting of same sex partnerships vs. marriage, because the latter challenges their definition of the institution of marriage.

Perry and Snawder (2016) suggested individuals who consumed religious media may be influenced negatively toward LGBT individuals. Even seemingly innocuous religious groups—like the Presidential Prayer Team whose members pray for elected leaders—can promulgate anti-LGBT views (Burack, 2014).

Religious views can also be shaped by the government and society—how accepting or unaccepting society is toward the LGBTQ community, regardless of law, has a profound impact on views and actions. Henshaw (2014) found both religious belief and heteronormativity in government policies shaped internal views of gay individuals. Others believe a live-and-let-live approach to LGBT individuals in religious settings is a happy medium (Ball, 2019). Religious views of intolerance against LGBTQ+ individuals in rural South Africa continue to stigmatize these individuals, regardless of equality laws (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015).

In Okrey Anderson and McGuire's (2021) study, they found many transgender individuals from religious backgrounds exhibited the same symptoms of Boss's (2016) ambiguous loss theory. That is, these individuals continued to disengage with their psychological family due to the stress caused by their sexual differences. This supports both anecdotal and academic research on the subject: A non-accepting religious family has the potential to cause trauma to LGBTQ individuals.

Race. In the United States, race often intersects with religion and spirituality differences for those in the LGBTQ community. Lassiter et al. (2017) used a large dataset ($N = 1071$) of racially and ethnically diverse HIV-negative gay and bisexual men and found most participants were not religious or spiritual. White men reported lower levels of spirituality, religious coping, and religiosity compared to Black men. Latino men used religious coping significantly less than Black men (Lassiter et al., 2017). Latino bisexual men reported religion and masculinity negatively impacted their behavior and lifestyle (Severson et al., 2014).

Historically, Black churches have openly expressed and support anti-gay views (Ward, 2005). Pingel and Bauermeister

(2018) found young Black gay and bisexual men were most at risk of social isolation when Black churches advocated this stigma. Quinn et al. (2016) found young Black men who had sex with men would often hide their sexuality from others in order to stay engaged with their church. Contrary, other researchers examining bisexual Black men reported finding some acceptance and even sexual partners within religious communities (Jeffries et al., 2008).

Age. There is a complex relationship between age, religion, and LGBTQ individuals. Scheitle and Wolf (2017) found while gay adults tended to follow their childhood belief systems, they often moved away from more traditional religious institutions in favor of those with more progressive views. Hall et al. (2020) found high religious young people had stronger anti-gay views than their peers with not as high of religiousness. Lassiter et al. (2017) found younger LGBTQ adult participants with 4-year college degrees were less likely than their non-degreed counterparts to attend religious services.

Young gay and bisexual men diagnosed with HIV infection showed higher levels of religious service attendance (66%) than other studies (Jeffries et al., 2014). Only 16% believed they could safely disclose their sexuality at church, and 37% believed homosexuality was sinful. Foster et al. (2011) reported HIV-positive Black men in the San Francisco-Oakland Bay area felt integrating HIV prevention with spiritual practice and faith-based HIV/AIDS ministries that supported HIV-positive men would be helpful.

Being young and LGBTQ is often a reason for homelessness, with nearly an estimated half a million LGBTQ youth in the U.S. experiencing an episode annually (Ream & Forge, 2014). While some young, unhoused LGBTQ adults saw religion as a source of resilience, many felt religion further stigmatized them in the community (Schmitz & Woodell, 2018).

Elementary teachers are in a unique position to help change narratives in regard to acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. Carlile (2020) found that working with colleagues and openminded children allowed England-based teachers to conduct LGBTQ-focused community events with parents from the faith communities served.

Mormonism. The Mormon church has strong heteronormative views (Chakravarty & English, 2021). Researchers interviewed LGBTQIA members and found many developed their own spiritual/sexual viewpoint in order to personally navigate the Mormon views on sexuality. In another study, Chakravarty et al. (2022) surveyed lesbian and bisexual Mormons and found those who identified as lesbian were most likely to have fully disengaged with the church. The women who identified as bisexual had to navigate hiding their sexuality from the church.

From a viewpoint of a former member, Schneider (2022) confirmed the strong Mormon policies against LGBTQ+ individuals. The Mormon church reportedly told a gay person they had no place in heaven unless they renounced their lifestyle.

Islam. Muslim men who identify as gay often struggle to find cohesion between their sexuality and their strong religious foundation (Anonymous, 2016). Muslims living in South Africa struggled over what makes a person gay—just thoughts or actions (Bonthuys & Erlank, 2012). Muslim gay men in New Zealand admitted to struggling with this dilemma, but most found they were able to reach a middle ground. Scull and Mousa (2017) interviewed ten adult LGBTQ+ Kuwaitis about their experiences living in a social conservative country. The participants admitted to struggling with their sexuality identity due to not only potential familial discrimination but also legal ramifications and violence. In predominantly Muslim Iran,

transgender individuals often sought greater religiousness in order to find security and acceptance (Heidari et al., 2021).

Jaspal (2012) examined the views of British Indian and British Pakistani gay men who were involved with their respective religion. British Indians saw the intersection between sexuality and ethnicity as most relevant, which was different than British Pakistanis who felt the intersection of sexuality and religion as the most important. Both groups saw their homosexuality as being socially problematic (Jaspal, 2012). In another approach, Golriz (2021) looked at how Queer and Transgender Muslim Organizations in Canada helped to combine both LGBT and religious views so members could find community together.

Eastern Religions. Followers of Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism, were shown to have more religious tolerance and less antigay prejudice than Christians in a large survey of Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese participants (Clobert et al., 2014). A Burmese spiritual medium, *nat kadaw*, is often portrayed as having transgender and erotic elements (Ho, 2009). While outwardly chastised, a member of a Hindu-based religious cult described how gay individuals were tolerated if they were privileged and discreet (Bradshaw, n.d.).

African Religions. Structured interviews conducted with gay members of African-based *kwandengue*, a tribe in Cameroon, found participants found stress shoring up their religion with their sexuality (Ntetmen Mbetbo, 2013).

The “Moonies”. Sun Myung Moon, now deceased leader of the Unification Church (aka “Moonies”), had preached anti-homosexual, anti-Semitic, and racist ideology (*Anti-LGBT Cult Leader Calls on Followers to Purchase Assault Rifles* 2018). His son started the Sanctuary Church in Pennsylvania, where followers were asked to purchase automatic weapons. Moon had very strong anti-LGBTQ views (Dobija-Nootens, 2019). Dobija-Nooten’s (2019) podcast tells the story of a young man who was involved in the Moonies, but came out gay. This young man disconnected from the group instead of facing the wrath of being found out within the Moonies.

Another young man also disconnected from the Moonies when he came to terms with his sexuality (Han, 2022).

Jim Jones and the People’s Temple. While coming from a strong Christian religious foundation, there were reports that Jim Jones may have had latent homosexual tendencies (Wise, 2020). A contemporary of Jones reported Jones soliciting him for sex. There was also a report of Jones being arrested in an area known to be frequented by gay men. The People’s Temple was also known for being LGBTQ-accepting (Bellefontaine, 2011).

Children of God aka The Family. This religious group was known for many things, including sexual abuse by its leader and members (Tewa, 2017). There were even reports of youth as young as four having sex. One former member, who identifies now as a Lesbian, talked about how the group was against homosexuality (Gross, 2021). A researcher of The Family, however, explained that while homosexuality between men was forbidden, lesbianism was not (Kyle, 1993). Either way, this group was not as open to the LGBTQ lifestyle.

Other groups. While there are many other groups that people view as cults, there is generally a consistent theme of anti-LGBTQ views to varying degrees.

Discussion

The purpose of this literature review was to show a connection between religious groups or cults and the LGBTQ lifestyle. I was unable to find extensive academic research connecting these topics, but did find evidence that most religious groups have anti-LGBTQ views. The more progressive groups may maintain a “hate the sin, love the sinner” approach. However, their more extreme counterparts often have adopted very polarized views toward the LGBTQ community.

From Fred Phelps to the Methodist, there are always going to be variations regarding this topic. Religion is seen as a significant part of many people's lives, and it is important to them that they are accepted and see others like them. Religious groups have had significant impacts on the people who have associated with them. There is hope. Eichel (2017) reported that sex therapy with former cult members can work, although it can be a challenge.

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