IS RELIGION "LGBTQ+ ENOUGH?": A STUDY OF QUEER COMMUNITY BOUNDARY
WORK

by

Jayson Gulick

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Approved by:

_____

Dr. Scott Fitzgerald

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Dr. Vaughn Schmutz

_____

Dr. Lisa Walker

ABSTRACT

JAYSON GULICK. Is Religion "LGBTQ+ Enough?": A Study of Queer Community Boundary Work.
(Under the direction of DR. SCOTT FITZGERALD)

In this study, I investigate how the meanings of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences involving religion influence, create, and maintain symbolic boundaries in the LGBTQ+ community surrounding religion. Prior research has focused on the perspectives of religious LGBTQ+ people, but often leaves out the perspectives of non-religious LGBTQ+ people in their analysis of religious and LGBTQ+ boundary work. To understand this process, I interview both religious and non-religious community members to investigate their experiences with and perceptions of religion and religious people and their understandings involving "coming out as religious" in the LGBTQ+ community. To recruit participants, I contacted LGBTQ+ organizations and personal networks to gain access to LGBTQ+ community members. Initial interviews then snowballed into additional ones, leading to a total of 20 interviews. Zoom interviews lasted 30 minutes to 2 hours and were collected over a 6 month time period in 2023. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. I used Nvivo software to conduct thematic coding and by interviewing both religious and non-religious community members, I am able to examine the process of "coming out as religious", boundary work, and the content of symbolic boundaries around these identities from both perspectives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my participants and everyone within the LGBTQ+ community. A special feeling of gratitude to my cohort members, who commiserate with me and provided camaraderie in my graduate school experience. My chosen family in the Carolinas and my biological family have been my greatest supporters and are very special to me.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religion and sexuality may seem like two divergent topics. When these two topics are narrowed down to religious beliefs and LGBTQ+ identity, this gap can feel even wider. Why is this? Religion is one of society's major social institutions. With this power comes influence. Religious communities can perpetuate marginalization, harassment, and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ people (Sumerau et al. 2016). For example, heterosexual family members who exclude and abuse their gay relatives may follow the behaviors modeled by authorities in their religious groups (Barton 2012). This can normalize harmful treatment of LGBTQ+ people within religious groups, making it not only expected in their own community, but by the LGBTQ+ community as well.

This habitual marginalization in religious spaces often leads to negative mental health effects for LGBTQ+ people. These effects include increases in depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Gandy et al. 2021), all more severe in young adults than for other age groups (Gibbs & Golbach 2015). To avoid hardship, many leave the religion they were raised in (Tranby & Zulkowski 2012) or stop affiliating with non-affirming religious institutions (McCann et al. 2020).

The effects of these attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people appear to perpetuate the negative reputation of religion in the LGBTQ+ community. The Pew Research Center (Anon 2013) found that most LGBT respondents rated all religions as more unfriendly than friendly and 29% of LGBT adults say they feel unwelcome in religious spaces. Marginalization from religious institutions is especially common for black LGBTQ+ people (Anon 2013; Young 2022), bisexual and trans Christians (Hunt 2016), and trans people of color (James et al. 2016).

Despite this conflict, around 5.3 million LGBTQ+ adults identify as religious in the United States (Conron et al. 2021). The Pew Research Center found that many religious respondents say homosexuality conflicts with their religious beliefs, but they also found that 66% of LGBTQ+ adult respondents say there is no conflict between their identities and religious beliefs (Anon 2013).

Not all religious leaders model discriminatory social scripts either. Theologians call upon queer theology that uses "theology as a tool in addressing the oppression" (Hunt 2016) LGBTQ+ people face in the church and helps liberate them. In a national survey of trans people, "ninety-four percent (94%) reported that community leaders and/or members accepted them for who they are as a transgender person, and more than three-quarters (80%) were told their religion or faith accepts them" (James et al. 2016). LGBTQ+ people can also experience positive mental health effects through religion. Being religious has been associated with lower levels of depression (Boppana & Gross 2019) and religion can act as a supportive (McCann et al 2020) and protective resource for LGBTQ+ people (Gandy et al. 2021).

This is not to say living at the intersection of being religious and LGBTQ+ is easy. Being LGBTQ+ and Christian presents a difficult "choice between two seemingly irreconcilable yet important paths: Christian belief and a minority sexual or gender identity" (Wilcox 2000). Minimizing or rejecting an identity does not lead to positive attitudes towards the identity the individual conforms to (Debjani et al. 2022). Therefore, some LGBTQ+ people use alternative strategies to manage this internal conflict. At the individual level, they can integrate (Lampe et al. 2019; Rodriguez 2009; Thumma 1991) and justify (Sumerau 2017) their identities and reconceptualize them to make them moral (Sumerau et al. 2016; Thumma 1991). Religious LGBTQ+ people also show an awareness of the structural forces because they change their

behaviors to better fit norms (Sumerau et al. 2018) or change the norms themselves (McQueeny 2009; Tranby & Zulkowski 2012) and hold Christians accountable to re-evaluate the morality of the church's anti-LGBTQ+ opinion (McQueeny 2009; Rostosky et al. 2008). Some create their own alternatives to discriminatory religious spaces or engage in dialogue and activism to change them (Avishai et al. 2024). Still, some choose to participate in their religion and not disclose their sexuality to avoid conflict or keep their religious identity private (Rostosky et al. 2008; Tranby & Zulkowski 2012). However, withholding a valued identity can result in different and stronger distress outcomes (Marcussen & Large 2003).

Rather than beginning with the assumption that being religious and LGBTQ+ is inherently conflicting, Rodriguez (2009) views LGBTQ+ people as "spiritual and religious beings in their own right, rather than merely sexual beings needing to be compared and contrasted with religious others'." Similar to Rodriguez (2009), I take the perspective that views LGBTQ+ people as capable of being religious in their own right while simultaneously considering the harm LGBTQ+ individuals experience at the hands of non-inclusive religious people. Specifically, I investigate the symbolic boundaries and the process of "coming out as religious" as they are understood by non-religious and religious members of the LGBTQ+ community. With the rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation related to Christian Nationalism (Peele 2023) and rise in the numbers of LGBTQ+ people across the United States (Jones 2022), the "regulatory power of queer communities" (Ghaziani & Holmes 2023) may be at present in boundary work to protect its members who were harmed through religion, preserve solidarity by making sure religious members feel included, or a careful combination of both.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Symbolic Boundaries

Symbolic Boundaries are what potentially separate religious and non-religious LGBTQ+ people. These boundaries help us determine social membership, or what might be "queer enough." Symbolic boundaries are what social actors create as the distinctions they use to categorize everything in their social world (Lamont & Molnár 2002). Therefore, they socially construct our realities by means of differentiation. These distinctions "can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes" (Lamont et al. 2015).

The creation of symbolic boundaries begins with a "cultural toolkit" (Swidler 1986), a collection of ideas, symbols, and metaphors which influences our attitudes and behaviors. People then use these tools to construct boundaries between themselves and others. Once agreed upon, they determine group relations by generating feelings of similarity and membership for those in the worthy in-group and exclusion for those outside of it (Lamont & Molnár 2002; Tranby & Zulkowski 2012). The distinctions between groups are formed and maintained by assigning worth to and defining people based on their group status. Members of the outgroup have exaggerated differences, and are often homogenized and stereotyped (Tranby & Zulkowski 2012). I investigate the group relations in the LGBTQ+ community surrounding religion and what distinctions might exist for its religious members.

Different types of boundaries make different distinctions and therefore different meanings. Michéle Lamont (1992) provides definitions for three different types of boundaries in her study of upper-middle class white men in the U.S. and France. These include moral boundaries, cultural boundaries, and socioeconomic boundaries. The boundaries around religion

in the LGBTQ+ community are likely moral and cultural boundaries. Moral boundaries assess a person's qualities and cultural boundaries assess a person's familiarity and comfort of cultural forms and genres including manners, taste, and so on (Lamont 1992). For example, a moral boundary that non-religious LGBTQ+ people might use to differentiate themselves from religious members of the community might be that they view their religious counterparts as more narrow-minded. A cultural boundary that non-religious community members might draw could be based on being religious not being "in taste" in the LGBTQ+ community.

The reason for creating and the effects of these boundaries can differ depending on the group and what side of the boundary they exist on. Lamont and Molnár (2002) provide specific properties for understanding this variability of boundaries. The first is *permeability*. For example, these boundaries might be more permeable for a religious person to talk about their beliefs when it is also understood that they are queer rather than if that was unknown to community members. Certain religions might also be seen as more compatible within the community. The second is *salience*. Protecting LGBTQ+ community members from harm related to religion might increase the salience or importance of keeping these boundaries up. The third property is *durability*. These boundaries might be more durable if a cycle of marginalization continues at the hands of religious individuals, meaning the boundaries should be held up longer. The final property is *visibility*. This could refer to who sees or knows of the boundaries a group has, in this case, if religious and non-religious LGBTQIA+ people recognize the same boundaries within the community. In considering these properties, symbolic boundaries are not always permanent because these boundaries can move and change.

Symbolic boundaries can also be purposefully changed. Walker & Fitzgerald (2021) use the term "self-effacing boundary work" to describe boundary maintenance that is done

intentionally to reduce the negative effects of upholding and maintaining symbolic boundaries. So, rather than boundaries being unintentionally permeable, LGBTQ+ people may intentionally create more permeable boundaries to include their own community members while excluding others to maintain some level of distinction.

The study of symbolic boundaries theory has two major insights (Lamont & Molnar 2002) : 1) boundaries come with packages of assumptions about others that are culturally and historically specific and 2) symbolic boundaries can become concrete social ones which explain and justify inequalities (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Virág 2002; Perry & Whitehead 2015). These packages of assumptions likely include stigma, which often serves as its own justification for unequal treatment, access to community belonging, discrimination. Erving Goffman ([1963]1986) characterizes homosexuality as a stigma related to individual character, which is "perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty," and religion carries a tribal stigma that "can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family" (4). However, homosexuality has a "sticky stigma" (Barton 2012: 57), meaning that being associated with a gay person can transfer the stigma onto an individual, much like tribal stigma. LGBTQ+ stigma is relatively more strong in the context of a religious community than others (Schmitz & Woodell 2018), related to "issues around discriminatory attitudes, shame related to disclosure," and "external factors around sexual orientation concerns" (McCann et al. 2020). Gender and sexuality are prevalent reasons for creating cultural divides in religious and political landscapes in the U.S. and across the world (Edgell 2012; Schnabel 2016). Conservative religious groups like Muslims and Evangelicals often draw their own boundaries around gender and sexuality (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Guhin 2020).

A cultural perspective can investigate what the content of a "sticky" (Barton 2012: 57) religious stigma is when it attaches itself to a religious LGBTQ+ person, therefore affecting intragroup interactions by way of symbolic boundaries. Therefore, symbolic boundaries, "are useful not just for understanding attitudes, values, and political divides, but also what motivates action [and] how people understand their behaviors," (Schnabel et al. 2022: 273). Concepts that can help connect meanings of boundaries surrounding religion in the LGBTQ+ community to behavior are explained in the following section.

2.2 Boundary Work

The social processes that form symbolic boundaries, separating identities and groups, differ depending on which perspective they are studied from. Social psychologists see social identification as the mechanism (Tajfel & Turner l979) and see these mechanisms as universal (Lamont et al. 2015). Cultural sociologists focus on the specific content and cultural context as forming the boundaries (Lamont & Molnár 2002). However, both perspectives are important to understanding how religious LGBTQ+ people are viewed in the LGBTQ+ community.

They can converge in understanding boundary work, a process of social interaction central to group identity (Lamont et al. 2015). Once a concept of the sexual and religious self are developed through the meanings of life experiences and social interaction, someone can develop social or group identities based on group membership (Burke & Stets 2009), allowing the formation of symbolic boundaries between and within groups and for boundary work to begin. Like the self, symbolic boundaries are socially constructed and given meaning, then reflected in boundary work. Boundary work includes actions taken to maintain a collective identity and establish one group as better than another (Gieryn 1983) and oftentimes considers moral boundaries when religion is the subject of boundary work (Tranby & Zulkowski 2012).

Identity disclosure, a behavior that can affect and be affected by group membership and therefore considered boundary work, may change depending on what the symbolic boundaries determine as constituting group membership. Ghaziani and Holmes (2023) developed a theory of coming out that could relate to disclosing religious affiliation in LGBTQ+ contexts. How these disclosures look may be a response to symbolic boundaries in the community and therefore a form of active boundary work. Ghaziani and Holmes (2023: 918) derive their theory from how when individuals think about coming out, they "draw on how they think others perceive them (Goffman 1959), cognitive schemas that aid in interpreting and verifying those perceptions (Stryker & Burke 2000), and an awareness of structural constraints on the range of possibilities (Burke & Stets 1999)." For example, an LGBTQ+ Christian may think someone perceives them as non-religious and verifies this by the assumption that most LGBTQ+ are non-religious, a structural constraint on the "range of possibilities" they could be perceived as.

After these steps, an individual would consider the space they are in to decide whether or not to disclose. Ghaziani & Holmes (2023) use the example of choosing between coming out at a pride event as compared to coming out at work or a dinner party. For the example of the LGBTQ+ Christian, "coming out as religious" might be easier to do in a queer youth group than to a group of other LGBTQ+ people where they do not know their religious affiliation. Based on the space a religious person is in and the possible boundary work of those receiving the disclosure, a religious LGBTQ+ person would then decide whether or not to disclose their affiliation. This process creates a situational salience of the religious self.

Similarly, boundary drawing can vary depending on an individual's identities, interests, and social location within a group (Delehanty et al. 2019). Therefore, the power to draw boundaries or respond to them during a disclosure process relies on the meanings packaged with

identities by way of symbolic boundaries. For example, depending on the boundaries the religious discloser and the non-religious receiver perceive, they might disclose or respond differently respectively. If boundaries in the LGBTQ+ community are high surrounding religion, a non-religious queer person would enact boundary work in a way that places the religious individual as morally lesser. Therefore, even if someone has a high level of salience of their religious self, depending on the symbolic boundaries that exist in the LGBTQ+ community, this might affect the situational salience of that identity and how or if the individual "comes out" to another LGBTQ+ person as religious so they can preserve the collective LGBTQ+ identity, or feeling "LGBTQ+ enough."

However, this is not to say that both identities cannot exist at the same time at different capacities. Identity theorists acknowledge that people have multiple identities and are multifaceted (Burke & Stets 2009). For example, Wayne Brekhaus (2003) analyzes how suburban gay men navigate boundary work and coming out. They perform the gay social identity as a full time lifestyle, switch between a gay social identity in gay spaces and switch to others in other spaces, or integrate their gay identity with their other identities. This could be related to situational salience of the gay identity, but also the boundaries of the other groups they navigate. Similar to performing a gay social identity in gay spaces, a religious LGBTQ+ person may manage sharing their religious affiliation or performing their gay identity in spaces congruent to those parts of themselves. Knowing the cultural context and meanings of religion in the LGBTQ+ community that form the symbolic boundaries surrounding them are the key to understanding how interactions of "coming out as religious" in the community function as an active form of boundary work.

2.3 Boundaries in the Community

Just as symbolic boundaries change in other communities, they are also subject to change in the LGBTQ+ community. Stein (1997) analyzes how the dominant cultural meanings of who can be considered lesbian has changed over time. For example, the idea of being a lesbian has shifted to include trans women, non-binary people, and more feminine women.

Symbolic boundaries highlight cultural divisions in the LGBTQ+ community. Just as being a black woman and a republican may be seen as conflicting (Wineinger 2019), a seemingly opposing identity to an LGBTQ+ identity is being a republican due to the LGBTQ+ identity being politicized. According to the Williams Institute, 72% of LGB democrats feel a part of the LGBTQ+ community while only 46% of LGB republicans do (Meyer & Choi 2020). The separation of political leanings can be translated into moral boundaries as well, where LGBTQ+ democrats might be seen as morally better because their party often supports the community. Political values can also be seen as a cultural taste, constituting a cultural boundary.

Symbolic boundaries also affect feelings of worth or being "enough" in the LGBTQ+ community, often situated along cultural meanings of how people should behave to properly embody certain identities in the community. The gay male community breaks itself off into different "tribes." While these can be centers for community and improve feelings of worthiness, they can be exclusionary when someone does not fit the ideal of the "tribe" well enough. This can amplify feelings of rejection in what would normally be a safe space (Green 2014). Members of the LGBTQ+ community also experience gatekeeping in the forms of biphobia, acephobia, transphobia, and racism (Parmenter et al. 2020). These especially affect young adults in the community who need access to support and inclusion the most. This age group often feels "policed regarding the authenticity of their identities, due to their appearance, (not) meeting

stereotypes, not being "enough," not presenting in a way that allowed others to properly "read" their identities, or by having identities that have been deemed invalid by the community" (McCormick & Barthelemy 2020). Krull (2020) found that young adult Christians who are members of inclusive congregations may have similar concerns with the negative stigma being Christian could carry.

This leads into the conversation of symbolic boundaries at the intersection of LGBTQ+ and religious membership. There is research on the moral symbolic boundaries LGBTQ+ Christians draw. J.E. Sumerau's (2016) analyzes how LGBTQ+ Christians view non-religious people. LGBTQ+ Christians view them as "(1) morally suspect and untrustworthy, (2) in need of salvation and guidance, and (3) poor representations of the LGBT community" (Sumerau 2016). Christians were specifically referring to non-religious LGBTQ+ people in the third point. Therefore, some LGBTQ+ Christians draw boundaries based on who is worthy of representing the community between themselves and their non-religious counterparts.

Moral symbolic boundaries are also seen in how LGBTQ+ inclusive Christians view non-inclusive Christians. Laura Krull (2020) interviewed inclusive congregants who contrast themselves against anti-LGBTQ+ congregations they perceive as oppressive, hateful, or enacting barriers. This sentiment was used to separate themselves from anti-LGBTQ+ Christians across a moral boundary. While including gay men and lesbian women in the congregation was a symbolic boundary that upheld their status as an inclusive church, by only discussing marriage equality, concerns of other members of the LGBTQ+ community were neglected. Ironically, this made them exclusive as well. Krull's (2020) finding that young adult members of inclusive congregations who expressed concerns with the negative stigma being Christian could carry. If

these young adults are worried about carrying this stigma, it could carry into the LGBTQ+ community as well.

Left unanswered is whether non-religious LGBTQ+ people draw boundaries between themselves and religious LGBTQ+ people. Despite these concerns expressed by young adults (Krull 2020) and LGBTQ+ people being less religious than the general public (Anon 2013), there is little research on whether being religious makes someone feel "not LGBTQ+ enough" (McCormick & Barthelemy 2020). To understand this, I research the content of the symbolic boundaries surrounding religion in the LGBTQ+ community and how they affect boundary work during the disclosure process of "coming out as religious" in the LGBTQ+ community.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Prior research has focused on the perspectives of religious LGBTQ+ people, but often leaves out the perspectives of non-religious LGBTQ+ people in their analysis of symbolic boundaries at the intersection of sexuality and religion. I aim to understand these boundaries specifically in the context of the LGBTQ+ community rather than religious communities and from both the religious and non-religious perspectives. To understand the content of symbolic boundaries surrounding religion and the boundary work within the community I investigate experiences with and perceptions of religion and understandings involving "coming out as religious" in the LGBTQ+ community.

I predict that prior experiences with religion will affect the permeability of symbolic boundaries of religion in the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, analyzing experiences LGBTQ+ people have with religion, their perceptions of and attitudes toward religion, and how they understand how their community perceives religion is also important. This can unveil both the content and possible reason for forming symbolic boundaries surrounding religion in the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, the boundaries surrounding religious people at large and then religious people within the context of the community will be compared, as will how religious and non-religious people understand these boundaries.

Finally, I aim to understand how LGBTQ+ people understand the process of "coming out as *religious"* goes in the context of the community. How do religious community members consider and enact disclosing? How do non-religious community members respond? This can help understand how the process of boundary work might look and what considerations, meanings, and understandings of symbolic boundaries members of the community take in the process.

4. METHODS

4.1 Methodology

This is a qualitative study to understand how the meanings of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences involving religion may influence, create, and maintain symbolic boundaries in the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore my approach takes an interpretivist methodology, where the goal is to understand as deeply as possible, someone's social world from their perspective. By collecting this data and coding for emergent themes, I illuminate what symbolic boundaries surrounding religion in the LGBTQ+ community look like from the perspectives of both religious and non-religious community members.

4.2 Sampling and Recruitment

The LGBTQ+ community is considered a marginalized, vulnerable group and can be difficult to access. Therefore, I planned my sampling method accordingly and only collected data from participants 18 years old or older. After receiving IRB approval, I began my recruitment process by reaching out to leaders of LGBTQ+ organizations via email to request interviews from their members. I am also an LGBTQ+ individual who hosted and attended community events in affirming places of worship and elsewhere. I accessed these personal networks via email to request additional interviews. In this sense, the sampling process was purposive because leaders of organizations and personal contacts acted as the gatekeepers to access community members. However, once gaining access through gatekeepers and initial interviews, I requested that participants share the research opportunity with other LGBTQ+ people they know. Therefore, I conducted a mixed sampling method of both purposive and snowball sampling. This second method was particularly useful for recruiting religious LGBTQ+ people since they are

likely to know other religious LGBTQ+ people. This was valuable since the majority of people in the community are not religious (Anon 2013).

I did not limit my sample to a specific geographic location for two reasons. First, the LGBTQ+ community can be conceptualized as an imagined community (Winer 2020) since it is more amorphous and held together primarily by ingroup solidarity based in identity. This means that it is not tied to a specific location. However, the location can shape the cultural context that part of the community exists in and I wanted to be open to this variation.

4.3 Interviews

I utilize semi-structured interviews for several reasons. Interviews can reveal meanings LGBTQ+ people give to symbolic boundaries surrounding religion, which give them the power to perform boundary work and affect their behavior. Interviews also allow participants to share their perceptions of religion in fuller detail than they would a survey and provide further explanation to how it affects their worldview. Interviews provide accounts of the ways people make sense of the process of "coming out as religious." How people understand their identities and the meanings of the situations will shape their identity disclosures differently (Ghaziani & Holmes 2023). Interviews are also built to collect data on complex issues. The interplay of sexual identity and religion can be contentious as evidenced in the introduction and both can be very personal and individual topics. Therefore, an interview gives space and time for participants to explain the intricacies of the overlap of religion in the LGBTQ+ community.

I conducted semi-structured rather than unstructured interviews. A semi-structured interview allows for consistency across all interviews so all the same questions are asked to all participants. Although the analysis will be emergent, the goal is to understand what the symbolic boundaries surrounding religion are in the LGBTQ+ community and what boundary work looks

like. Therefore, there are major concepts within symbolic boundaries that need to be considered

for every participant. A semi-structured interview also allows for questions in the interview

guide to be organized by major concepts. Groupings of questions include LGBTQ+ identity,

religious affiliation, experiences with religion, perceptions of religion, and interactions about

"coming out as religious" to examine what the symbolic boundaries are and the process of

boundary work. The interview protocol can be found in the appendix. Since not every participant

may have "come out a religious" or been on the receiving end of that process, I asked both about

actual and imagined experiences to provide explanations for prior actions, imagined actions, and

cognitive maps.

So my sampling could span more than one geographic location, all of my interviews took

place over Zoom meetings. Each participant received a $25 Amazon gift card. The process of

conducting interviews, writing debriefs, and transcribing interviews lasted from June 2024 to

December 2024.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

I paid special attention in order to reduce the unintended possibility of outing individuals.

After reaching out to leaders in the LGBTQ+ community, they dispersed the interview

opportunity to the members of their organization. The description of the opportunity included my

campus email address and participants were directed to email me if interested in participating.

All files were given ID numbers and who the ID numbers were connected to was only known by

the researchers. Participants were also made aware of how their identities would be protected in

the informed consent form and verbally reconfirmed consent at the beginning of each interview.

The Zoom recordings only included audio and were deleted once the transcripts were cleaned.

All names and locations mentioned in the interviews received pseudonyms when responses are

reported to protect the identity and location of the participant. Making these protections known can increase the validity of participant's responses since they may be more comfortable to share truthful information knowing it will not be traced back to them.

4.5 Analytic Strategies

All interviews and notes were recorded and transcribed through Zoom. Then, they were cleaned by listening to the audio and editing any incorrect transcriptions. To analyze themes, I used NVivo software. By allowing themes to emerge from the data, meanings, perceptions, and understandings of religion in the LGBTQ+ community were uncovered. Even though I began with some preconceived codes for my general areas of inquiry from my interview guide, I remained open to coding emergent data.

I began my first round of coding by coding events and areas of inquiry from my interview guide line by line. Then, I coded these events as either positive or negative. These areas of inquiry include experiences involving religion, coming out as religious or LGBTQ+ on either side of the interaction, personal perceptions of religion, how participants understand the LGBTQ+ community's view of religion, and so on. Then, in my second round of coding, I used active terms (Charmaz 2006) to identify processes and I identified emergent themes within each positive and negative grouping. Some emergent themes were neutral and fell under structural constraints like race and geographic location. Rather than coding the contents of symbolic boundaries as positive or negative, since they can move and change, I only coded line by line for emergent themes. Next, emergent themes were organized under their related concepts, including moral or cultural symbolic boundaries, the qualities of symbolic boundaries (permeability, salience, durability, visibility), structural constraints or situational salience, and so on by way of axial coding. Finally, the boundaries and boundary work were compared across religious

affiliation to assess how religious and non religious community members understand these boundaries in the context of the LGBTQ+ community and how they affect the identity disclosure process.

4.6 Quality and Validity

The validity of the data collected through interviews is supported by the method itself. As discussed above, interviews answer questions about meaning, experiences, decision making, and can address complex topics. Interviews will also require a level of trust and rapport to share truthful responses to the questions, affecting validity. I shared my identity as an LGBTQ+ person in the interview requests for this reason.

This research is not concerned with replicability, but the variation in the perceptions of symbolic boundaries. The variety of experiences and meanings carry weight in understanding how symbolic boundaries can vary from person to person, group to group, or intersection to intersection. Generalization will not be achievable either. However, the goal of this study is to understand what symbolic boundaries surrounding religion in the LGBTQ+ community are and how they are formed, upheld, or changed based on peoples' understandings and experiences. Identification of these patterns need to be well supported by the data about meanings, experiences, and the process of "coming out as religious" through the detailed explanation of members in the community. Future research can then survey for these themes and understandings if they have questions about the prevalence of these boundaries or conduct experiments to understand the severity of their effects.

Asking respondents to recall their experiences with religion relied on their memory, affecting the validity of the interview data. However, there is value in their accounts of how they understand symbolic boundaries in the LGBTQ+ community and how they enacted boundary

work in their lived experiences or how they expected they might. If they did not experience "coming out as religious" on the disclosing or receiving end, hypothetical situations were presented in the interview questions to see how they would respond to or uphold symbolic boundaries. Even if a participant did not have this experience, they can still help build a conceptual map of the processes at play.

5. RESULTS

I begin by describing the characteristics of the individuals I interviewed. Then, the results are split into two parts. First, I will discuss the themes that arose for the content of the symbolic boundaries in the queer community surrounding religion. Then, I will discuss the themes of boundary work that takes place in the disclosure process of "coming out as religious" in the queer community.

5.1 Sample

All 20 respondents identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Their ages ranged from 20-35. All of the following characteristics of my sample are words my participants used to describe themselves and therefore, there may be several descriptions per participant and sums may seem to go over 20. For more detail, please see the table below.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

	Religious Affiliation	Pronouns	Gender Identity	Sexuality	Race	Age
Religious						
Michael	Christian	He/Him	Cisgender Man	Gay	White	32
Haley	Christian	She/Her	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	White	27
Mavis	Christian	They/Them	Non-Binary	Ace Lesbian	White	24
Kylie	Quaker	She/They	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	White	26
Aris	Jewish	They/He	Non-Binary	Queer	White	28
Spiritual(rel)						
JC	Spiritual Catholic	He/Him/Èl	Cisgender Man	Gay	Latinx	28
Jalisa	Spiritual	She/Her	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	Biracial, Black, Mixed Race	34
Kesha	Spiritual	She/Her	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	African American, Black	35
Adriana	Jesus Follower	She/Her	Cisgender Woman	Bi+	White	33
Spiritual(non)						
Crystal	Agnostic	She/They	Non-Binary	Pansexual, Demisexual	White, Cuban, Native, Mixed Race	25
Lucy	Interfaith	She/Her	Cisgender Woman	Queer	White	35
Non						
Caden	Non	He/It	Trans Man	Queer	White	25
Caroline	Non	They/She	Non-Binary	Pansexual	White	28
Derek	Non	They/He	Non-Binary	Bisexual	White	26
Rosaline	Non	She/Her	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	White	23
Lace	Non	They/Them	Non-Binary	Bisexual	White	23
Nik	Non	Any	Non-Binary, Queer	Queer	White	20
Macy	Non	She/Her	Trans Woman	Queer	White	28
Stella	Non	She/They	Trans Femme	Bisexual	White	27
Cara	Non	She/Her	Cisgender Woman	Gay	White	26

The majority of participants were White (15), followed by those who described themselves as Mixed Race (2), African-American or Black (2), and Latinx (1). In regards to gender, 11 identified as Trans in some way and 9 identified as Cisgender. Along the binary gender spectrum, 11 described themselves as Women or Femme, 3 as Men or Masculine, and 6 as Non-binary. The sexual identities in the sample also varied: 9 individuals described themselves as Bisexual or Pansexual, 7 identified as Queer, 5 as Gay or Lesbian, and 2 within the Aromantic or Asexual spectrum.

For the purposes of comparing boundary work across religious affiliations in the queer community, they were placed in 4 groups: Religious (5), Spiritual(rel) (4), Spiritual(non) (2), and Non (9). The Religious category includes those who said they consider themselves religious in the interview. This includes 3 individuals who are Christian, 1 who is Quaker, and 1 who is Jewish. Spiritual(rel) includes individuals who described themselves as spiritual as a way of practicing their beliefs independently, but still includes religious texts, beliefs, and practices from institutionalized religion. For example, one participant describes herself as a "Jesus Follower." Spiritual(non) includes individuals who described themselves as spiritual but not religious, do not practice anything from institutionalized religions, and broadly believe in the universe or all religions. Finally, Non includes participants who describe themselves as neither religious nor spiritual. During thematic coding, codes were separated by those who were grouped under Religious and Spiritual(rel) on one side of the symbolic boundaries and the process of "coming out as religious" and those who described themselves as Spiritual(non) and Non on the other.

5.2 Content of Symbolic Boundaries

      To understand what "sticky stigma" (Barton 2012: 57) might be carried from religion to a religious LGBTQ+ individual as part of the package of cultural meanings that inform boundaries, I first discuss the themes of symbolic boundaries the LGBTQ+ community members I interviewed impose on religious groups at large. Then, I discuss the themes of the symbolic boundaries surrounding religious community members, comparing how religious and non-religious community members understand them.

5.2.1 Religious Boundaries around the Community.

      I began by investigating the experiences my LGBTQ+ participants had with religious people, religion at large, their perceptions towards religious people, and how they think most people in the LGBTQ+ community view religion to understand the religious symbolic boundaries external to the LGBTQ+ community. It is important to note that 95% (n=19) of participants, regardless of religious affiliation or spiritual beliefs, reported negative experiences with religion and 85% of participants (n=17) believe that the LGBTQ+ community views religion negatively. This is not to say there were not some exceptions, but that if this stigma is carried with LGBTQ+ community members, within community boundaries could be very salient.

      The cultural boundaries are part of what make up the cultural package that helps build symbolic boundaries. Two major themes of cultural differences emerged between the LGBTQ+ and religious communities. The LGBTQ+ people I interviewed discussed two tastes that they see religious people having that run counter to the LGBTQ+ community, resulting in boundaries. The first theme is political values and the second is power dynamics. Participants viewed religious communities as more conservative than the LGBTQ+ community. Jalisa, a biracial,

cisgender lesbian says that she feels like being religious is "attached to these very conservative values." This taste does not align with feeling a part of the community. For example, there is a greater feeling of belonging for LGB democrats than for LGB republicans (Meyer & Choi 2020). The power dynamics in religious communities are incompatible with the LGBTQ+ community. According to Caden, a white, queer, trans man, those who "hold positions of, especially of power, in big religious institutions are usually these cis het white men." In this explanation, the ones in power in religious groups are not LGBTQ+. The quality of these leaders being cisgender and heterosexual makes the taste in power dynamics in religious groups in-transferable to the LGBTQ+ community.

Next are the moral boundaries participants drew around religious communities. The moral boundaries that cast religious people as morally lesser than LGBTQ+ people include two major themes. These include viewing religious people as disingenuous yet able to judge in some way (closed minded, judgmental, hypocritical, deceptive etc.) or causing overt and covert harm. In spite of this, some of my participants describe how they believe religious people might view themselves as morally better than LGBTQ+ people and some have a more nuanced perspective, where they view religious people as morally good as well and have had positive experiences with these people. Therefore, moral boundaries may not be the same across all experiences.

Some religious people were understood as disingenuous and judgmental by participants. For example, Caden relayed an experience where his father, a pastor, offered to help a family whose home flooded in a deceptive way, with his own underlying motivation. It was one of Caden's first indicators that he did not want to be religious anymore. Caden noticed that "It sort of got to a point where I could tell it was contingent on them continuing to come to the church. It was sort of like we'll help you, but then you need to become [one] of our members, you need to

be a part of our club." JC, a Latinx, gay, cisgender man and a spiritual Catholic describes one of the ways he sees religious people as hypocritical. After going out with his friends, he spoke with someone who was upset with him for doing so, saying "girl, weren't you at the club last night? … And then they'll be like, "Oh, well, you know, we all sin." Okay, girl, but then why are you yelling at me when we're in this mess together?" Kesha, an African American, bisexual, cisgender woman also highlights how the way she sees religious people judging others as inherently hypocritical because "most people who claim to be Christian are not, nowhere near what they claim, and, you know, the whole judging thing. People judge nonstop." To her, it is hypocritical to be Christian and still judge others.

Being harmful was a characteristic of religious people described by my participants that was exemplified overtly and covertly. Adriana, a white, bi+, cisgender woman who describes herself as a Jesus Follower, experienced covert harm. She remembers the harm she experienced when her mental health was brushed aside by members of her previous religious community. In her words, this was the response she experienced: "to tell people out loud, "I'm thinking about killing myself" and them saying, "Oh, well, you're just sad. It's not that bad. Let it go."" Stella, a white, bisexual, transfemme person, experienced overt harm as a child by way of punishment from her parents when she did not want to participate in religious activities:

> *If I expressed any discontent, of which I did quite often, I would be punished, and eventually, kind of what broke that experience was the punishments and strictness. It was stressing me out so much and causing so much internal turmoil. Especially because of my suppressed queer identity. I eventually challenged it and rejected it.*

Being harmed prevented the possibility of her being religious. In spite of this harmful treatment, Adriana described religious people as having a "superiority complex" and Crystal, a mixed race,

demisexual, pansexual, and non-binary individual says they still view themselves as "Holier than thou." Despite treating people harmfully, my LGBTQ+ respondents seemed to see religious people still seeing themselves as better than LGBTQ+ people.

This is not to say that religious people cannot be good people. Several of my respondents viewed religious people as morally good, but not necessarily morally better than LGBTQ+ people. Descriptions included wise, kind, and benevolent. Despite the negative experience Adriana had with some members of her previous church, one did help her with her mental health struggles:

> *I did have those friends, one of which was a chaplain, and she was wonderful. But like I could bring a lot to her and question a lot of things like about female leadership in the church, and she was really good about teaching me about it, or, "Hey, you need mental health resources. Here's some. You want me to take you? You want me to go with you?"*

Haley, a white, bisexual, cisgender Christian told a story about Sarah, an elderly woman she met in the thrift store. Sarah was wise enough to move beyond the negative characteristics her fellow Christians display because by praying with Sarah, Haley was able to "realize just how much of the external trappings of Christianity and what we've made it into now… we've lost a lot of the core message, but it's very encouraging to find it again in these smaller settings." This was encouraging to Haley because she was kicked out of her church after coming out. People like Haley and Adriana exemplify how LGBTQ+ people can have nuanced perspectives on religion.

These nuanced perspectives highlight the variability of boundaries. Depending on personal experiences with religion, my LGBTQ+ participants could view religious individuals as both morally lesser than themselves or morally good. The experiences my LGBTQ+ participants had with religion affected how permeable the boundaries between themselves and religious

groups are. Some of my participants found or knew of religious spaces and people that affirmed their LGBTQ+ identities. Adriana said that the chaplain who helped her with her mental health struggles also stressed that she was still a part of the religious community. The chaplain "was so awesome when I came out as queer and talking to this person, and them being like, "Of course I love you. Of course you're still part of this community."" Lace, a white, bisexual, nonbinary person has a slightly different experience:

> *There are some churches here in the city that are very open, that have booths at pride,*
> *that are very welcoming and diverse, and there's one in particular, I think it's United*
> *Church of Christ. They have a church here in the city. They openly discuss politics within*
> *their sermons, particularly about social justice issues, and equality. Which, that was one*
> *of the churches I was trying out when I was still experimenting with spirituality and I*
> *enjoyed the fact that they were so open about it, but still, churches make me*
> *uncomfortable.*

Even though Lace found a religious community that was supposedly compatible with their LGBTQ+ identity, their boundaries between themself as a LGBTQ+ person and religion were still less permeable, likely due to a past of negative experiences. Lace had a negative coming out experience with their mother and most of the reasoning was related to religion.

Now that I discussed the boundaries placed on religious groups and people by my LGBTQ+ participants, I will discuss in the next section the boundaries surrounding religion within the context of the LGBTQ+ community.

5.2.2 Within Community Boundaries: Religious and Non-religious

I begin my comparative analysis of the symbolic boundaries surrounding religion in the LGBTQ+ community as religious and non-religious people see them in this section. First, I will

discuss the themes where both religious and non-religious LGBTQ+ participants have the same understanding of the boundaries surrounding religion in the community. Then, I will discuss where their perceptions diverge, beginning with religious participants and finishing with non-religious participants.

Religious and non-religious participants perceived some of the same symbolic boundaries surrounding religious members of the LGBTQ+ community. Similar to the themes from the cultural boundaries surrounding religious individuals outside of the community, some within the community also included taste in political values and power dynamics. Additionally, being LGBTQ+ and having a taste for religion was understood by my participants as conflicting, but this conflict is related to sharing common ground in experiences with religion due to having LGBTQ+ identities.

Similarly to how participants view cultural boundaries around religious people, both religious and non-religious LGBTQ+ community members perceived similar ones drawn around religious LGBTQ+ community members. This means that the cultural packages, and possibly stigmas, did carry over from all religious people to religious LGBTQ+ people. The first theme that carries over are the political values, typically understanding LGBTQ+ religious people as conservative. Jalisa says that even for LGBTQ+ people,

> *Religion is connected to being conservative and so I feel like a lot of times people feel like, "how can you be queer and be so involved in the church when the church does not accept you as a queer person?" So I feel like, because of the teachings that we're taught, I feel like sometimes, there's that almost like, "Are you a sell out?"*

Additionally, Cara, a white, gay, cisgender woman also understands how being religious can seem incompatible while being a member of the LGBTQ+ community when it is tied to

conservative values. Similar to being a "sell out," Cara says being religious and LGBTQ+ "may be even seen as voting against themselves."

The second theme is the perception that to be "in taste" with the community, LGBTQ+ religious people hesitate to tie their beliefs to religious institutions. This may be related to negative experiences within these institutions for LGBTQ+ people or how the power dynamics do not seem compatible with the LGBTQ+ community. Mavis, a white, non-binary, ace lesbian provides their experience with this perception. Although they are Christian, they see religious LGBTQ+ people as participating in a "softer" form of religion:

> *It's a softer and a more subtle experience of religion, and I feel like the queer people I've talked to that are religious, don't really still go to church or anything. It's kind of a more personal, individualistic practice, and they may not bring a structure, or a church in to enforce that.*

As mentioned earlier, this could be due to the assumption that all LGBTQ+ people have been treated badly by religion, which leads to the third theme and a very permeable cultural boundary.

The third theme is that LGBTQ+ people share common ground due to simply being LGBTQ+ and having similarly negative experiences with religion. Several participants, mostly non-religious ones, seemed to see no reason why a religious LGBTQ+ person might be different from a non-religious person or not a part of the LGBTQ+ community. Derek, a white, bisexual, non-binary person says "Here's how you qualify: if you are not cishet, you are part of it." and later says, "the way they differ is that some are religious and some aren't. I don't know anything in particular that would be true among most of them, other than the literal statement you made that they're, you know, religious." Because of this some religious participants did not see religion

as affecting their belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. For example, Michael, a white, gay, cisgender Christian man says, "It doesn't hinder my feeling of belonging." and Aris, a white, queer, non-binary Jewish person says, "I don't feel like Judaism conflicts with being queer or being trans." Sadly, this lack of conflict is not true for everyone.

One of the other factors that create common ground for religious and non-religious community members is having negative experiences with religion. Adriana shared her sentiment: "we've all kind of been there, dealing with what it's like to be treated [badly] because of religion." In relation to negative experiences with religion, Lucy, a white, cisgender, queer woman, believes that "we all have more in common around the world than we do differences."

As mentioned before, religious LGBTQ+ people were understood by both religious and non-religious participants as experiencing internal conflict. This is possibly due to the seemingly incompatible cultural packages of being LGBTQ+ and religious. Therefore, the fourth theme is the perceived results of cultural incongruence rather than a boundary itself. Derek, a non-religious individual, and Aris, a Jewish person, both see the internal conflict LGBTQ+ people are engaging in. Derek said, "Sometimes they'll be kind of self hating. I mean, that's a really harsh way to put it, but maybe they're not square with the LGBTQ part of their identity because of the religious part of their identity." Aris adds, "When I think of religious LGBT people, I feel like I mostly think of fighting cognitive dissonance." Often times, this cognitive dissonance and feeling of internal conflict can make someone feel like they have to choose between being religious or embracing their minority sexual or gender identity (Wilcox 2000). Kesha relayed what one of her friends said to her: "Christianity is what I believe, being queer is who I am, and I feel like who I am is more important than what I believe."

Despite this internal conflict, the moral boundary both religious and non-religious people perceive is hardly a boundary at all; they see religious LGBTQ+ people as morally better. Rosaline, a white, queer, cisgender woman directly compared religious to non-religious LGBTQ+ people by saying "the non-religious queer people I know, definitely, I don't think would be as accepting as religious." Kesha said something that might explain why this might be: "I think that's because we have an innate desire to be accepted for all parts of our being. So, it is easier for us to accept other people." Both see religious LGBTQ+ people as morally better for being more accepting than other LGBTQ+ people, creating not only a permeable boundary, but rather a way that uplifts religious LGBTQ+ people. It could be the internal conflict of religion and LGBTQ+ cultural packages are what makes religious LGBTQ+ people so accepting in the first place.

However, the permeability of all these boundaries for religious people to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community are conditional on whether they cause inter-community harm. Macy, a white, queer, trans woman, said,

> *I think it just depends on the actions that are actually being taken by the person… I would hope that any decision, anything that they're doing with their life as a religious LGBTQ person, from the religious side, would be considerate of that other part, and of like what it could do to the community if they were doing something that was participating within a dangerous company in some way or donating in a direction that is not LGBTQ friendly.*

Based on this sentiment, religious LGBTQ+ community members can only be considered community members if they do not cause any inter-community harm.

In summary, both religious and non-religious participants recognize similar cultural packages of assumptions that follow religious LGBTQ+ people into the community. This may relate to the internal conflict for those who carry both group identities, but may also result in them being perceived as morally higher than non-religious queer people because they have a drive to be more accepting. Just because religious community members are more accepting and share common ground does not mean their access to the LGBTQ+ is unconditional however. Religious LGBTQ+ people need to behave in ways that do not cause any harm within the queer community for the boundaries to remain permeable.

5.2.3 Within Community Boundaries: Religious

Religious participants had perceptions of the symbolic boundaries placed on them in the LGBTQ+ community that non-religious participants did not perceive themselves placing. Moral boundaries that made religious people in general morally lesser than people in the LGBTQ+ people were perceived as being carried over by religious LGBTQ+ people into the context of the LGBTQ+ community. These could be "sticky stigmas" (Barton 2012: 57), similar to what young inclusive Christians in Krull's (2020) study were concerned about being associated with. These included religious participants feeling they were perceived as closed-minded and as seeing themselves as superior. For example, Mavis expressed this concern that the LGBTQ+ community sees

> *religious people, as having a very black and white, God, the devil, very binary view of the world. Something is either right or it's not. It's either a sin or it's not. From the LGBTQ community, identifying myself as a Christian feels like I'm signaling to everybody I have a very simplistic view of the world, like I'm not going to be nuanced about you, your*

problems, or your ideas. Like, I'm very set in my ways, I'm not willing to listen, I'm not

willing to be challenged, or hear new ideas.

Aris expressed concern that a religious person "might think they are better because they're able,

like, to hold both of those things," being able to be religious and LGBTQ+ where others could

not.

My religious participants also felt very isolated as religious and LGBTQ+, part of the

cultural package conflict that non-religious LGBTQ+ did not perceive. For example, Aris

described a lonely experience growing up: "I was like the only Jewish kid in the whole town…

But I was already like an outsider in one way, and then nobody was gay." Jalisa exists at the

intersection of being black, religious, and LGBTQ+, resulting in isolation:

I feel like race is one of those things because especially for like black people, black

church folks are hardcore and a lot of times are not accepting at all. And so it's a little bit

different, because you have some Lutheran churches that are more accepting, but the

congregation is a majority white. And so you have this space, but do you really fit in?

Because you don't have anyone who looks like you.

Due to religious black space's often negative perception of LGBTQ+ people (Young 2022) and

her intersecting identities, Jalisa faces isolation on multiple fronts.

In spite of concerns of negative assumptions and isolation, religious LGBTQ+

participants viewed the LGBTQ+ community as very welcoming, meaning they understood the

boundaries placed on them as fairly permeable. However, none of my religious participants

mentioned the whole LGBTQ+ community as being accepting of their religious affiliation. For

example, Michael said, "One thing that is so amazing about our community is, my opinion of

course, no matter what letter or plus you identify with in that spectrum, you are loved and

accepted exactly as you are." Mavis did mention their religious affiliation: "I think that there is not just one queer community and that there are queer people out there, and there are queer people out there, I've met them, who accept me fully as who I am, both as a religious person, a Christian, and as a queer person." In Mavis' case, the permeability seems more tentative; Some LGBTQ+ people may be welcoming to religious LGBTQ+ people.

In summary, religious LGBTQ+ participants expressed concern that some moral boundaries built around religious groups by LGBTQ+ extend to them. They also feel isolation as a result of the cultural packages of being religious and LGBTQ+ that non-religious participants did not describe. However, religious participants view the LGBTQ+ community as very welcoming and therefore having permeable boundaries, although the conditions to which are unclear.

5.2.4 Within Community Boundaries: Non-religious

Non-religious participants had different perceptions of the symbolic boundaries they placed on religious members of the LGBTQ+ community in ways religious participants did not perceive. Themes of how non-religious participants culturally package religious LGBTQ+ people include having other privileged identities, and how the conflict between being religious and LGBTQ+ can result in feeling a need to keep it secret or risk receiving backlash. Non-religious participants view religious LGBTQ+ people as morally good and sometimes better than themselves, even describing them as celebrated and valued members of the LGBTQ+ community because they are religious.

Non-religious participants understood religious LGBTQ+ people as having more privileged identities, or social identities that typically have more power than marginalized ones, aligning with the cultural boundary that differentiates the cisgender heterosexual white power

dynamics within religion from the LGBTQ+ community. Macy gave a description that depicts
how these assumptions carry over:

> *When I hear LGBTQ religious person, I just think of gay men, just gay cis men. Yeah,*
> *they're gay, they qualify, but also, they go to church. They partake. I don't know. The*
> *image in my head though, they all look like Republicans, like they have their brown hair*
> *in a short business cut…I've known a decent number of Christian gay guys. So I think it's*
> *also just an image in my head. Whereas, I feel like I haven't met very many Christian*
> *lesbian women.*

While Macy described how those in power in religion are similar to the LGBTQ+ people who
participate in it, Caden said, "I can't really imagine, like a sex worker of color that is trans
walking up into a church and feeling happy and safe and comfortable there … most queer people
that attend church would, like you sort of mentioned earlier, have less intersections of identity in
their life." This account explains how a person outside of this description would not fit in a
religious setting. However, this runs counter to how participants like Aris and Jalisa experience
their intersecting marginalized identities as isolating.

Rather than seeing the cultural conflict of being religious and LGBTQ+ as resulting in
isolation, non-religious participants recognized that religious LGBTQ+ people might be secretive
to avoid backlash. Religious LGBTQ+ people are understood as being secretive about their
religious affiliation or their LGBTQ+ identity. For example, Caden can see how a religious
LGBTQ+ person might be closeted, "like ex-gay or men that are married to a woman, but you're
kind of like "I see you bro, I see you."" However, Rosaline described how religious LGBTQ+
people "keep religion close to their chest, and almost don't want a lot of people to know, because
I think it is very polarizing in the queer community." Cara expanded on this need to be secretive

about religious affiliation: "It almost is like a coming out thing where they probably feel like this is a secret that they need to protect a little bit until they kind of gauge the person that they're possibly going to be open with… they probably catch a lot more slack than non-religious people." By saying they "probably catch a lot more slack," this suggests there is some form of retaliation or response that warrants religious LGBTQ+ people staying secretive about their religious beliefs.

The moral boundaries non-religious LGBTQ+ participants draw around their religious community, but that my religious participants do not recognize, are very permeable ones, because they openly include and uplift religious LGBTQ+ people in the community, meaning they are very permeable. Non-religious respondents described religious LGBTQ+ people as compassionate. Rosaline said, "I feel like the religious, queer people that I know are like really grounded or very compassionate people." Additionally, they are seen as morally better than non-religious LGBTQ+ people by non-religious participants. For example, Nik, a white, queer, gender queer person says, "I guess religious people can be more considerate than others, just because they've had to go through hardship. I feel like the more somebody goes through hardship, the more understanding they are towards others and religion is just another aspect of that." It is this hardship that made non-religious participants view religious LGBTQ+ as morally stronger as well. Nik continued, "They have more resolve. They know who they are better than other queer people."

Non-religious participants also celebrate and value religious people as members of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, Rosaline said, "I think that it's really interesting when queer people stay religious because they're really celebrated. I feel like not a lot of people are super critical of that." So, despite Aris worrying about religious LGBTQ+ people being perceived as

thinking they are better than others for being able to "hold both," they are, but rather than being scrutinized for having a superiority complex, they are celebrated. Cara shared a similar sentiment which elaborates on why the LGBTQ+ community would celebrate someone being able to be religious and LGBTQ+:

> *As a queer person who is non-religious, I think it would be really cool to see more religious, queer people. 'Cause like I said earlier, it almost [feels] like they broke out of the prison, or something, like they made it to the other side, and they're still a person, and they get almost the best of both worlds. I think it would be cool to get to experience that growth within our community.*

Lace also expressed why they support religious LGBTQ+:

> *Everybody adds something to the community, right? And the more religious, queer people we do have in churches- don't want to make it seem like this is a secret, gay agenda- The more queer people we have in churches, the more they're going to accept us, and the more we're going to change. I mean, in a way that's true. The more queer people you know, the more accepting you're probably going to be, and the more you're going to understand the perspectives that we have as a community that [are] unique to us. So, it's a very big responsibility that religious queer people have.*

Lace describes that religious LGBTQ+ people are not only celebrated because not only were they able to hold two supposedly conflicting parts of themselves simultaneously, but they can be catalysts for change in a way that can reduce that conflict for the LGBTQ+ community.

Non-religious participants may have seen religious LGBTQ+ people being more privileged in some ways by holding more privileged identities like those in power in religious

institutions, but they understand how hard it is to balance being queer and religious and having to keep it a secret, how strong and compassionate they are because of it, and celebrate them for it.

In summary, although religious and non-religious participants viewed some of the symbolic boundaries within the LGBTQ+ community surrounding religion similarly, where they diverge indicates a greater sense of perceived permeability of these boundaries by non-religious LGBTQ+ participants than religious participants perceive. How these boundaries affect how LGBTQ+ people understand their behaviors can be investigated through boundary work.

5.3 Boundary Work: "Coming Out as Religious"

After analyzing the symbolic boundaries surrounding religion in the LGBTQ+ community, now I move onto discussing the process of "coming out as religious" within the LGBTQ+ community. This section will illuminate how the symbolic boundaries above map onto how those disclosing their religious affiliation and those receiving the disclosure understand their behaviors. This constitutes boundary work because it considers actions taken to maintain a collective identity for both parties or establish one group as better than another for those receiving the disclosure (Gieryn 1983). For the most part, these disclosures are rare because both religious and non-religious participants agree that religion is something personal. Crystal explained this well by saying "it's almost considered more personal or more between that person and what they believe in rather than, "I feel the need to talk about this often, or perpetuate it towards other people, or encourage others to believe the same things or behave the same ways."" For this reason, participants were asked about how they navigate both imagined and prior, real experiences of "coming out as religious" to understand how conceptual maps of symbolic boundaries connect to boundary work. Also, understanding what would make religious

affiliation situationally salient in conversations within the LGBTQ+ community and what those conversations would look like if they were salient offers unique insight to boundary work.

I begin by describing how the perception of symbolic boundaries surrounding religion in the LGBTQ+ community map onto how those disclosing their religious affiliation understand their behavior and choices. Then, I describe how my non-religious participants understand how they receive and respond to this disclosure from another LGBTQ+ person. Finally, I discuss how both the individuals who disclose (religious) and those who receive the disclosure (non-religious) value the interaction.

5.3.1 Disclosing

The structural constraints and symbolic boundaries the LGBTQ+ community draws surrounding religion may shape the situational salience of religious LGBTQ+ people's religious affiliation, affecting the choice to disclose that affiliation in the interest of preserving a collective LGBTQ+ identity. This constitutes boundary work. I begin by discussing the structural constraints religious participants consider when faced with disclosing their religious affiliation to another LGBTQ+ person, their feelings leading up to the disclosure, how they share their affiliation, and how they experience how others react. I map symbolic boundaries on behaviors throughout to highlight the disclosure process as a form of boundary work to preserve a collective LGBTQ+ identity.

Religious participants face several constraints they would consider before disclosing their religious affiliation to another LGBTQ+ person. Both religious and non-religious participants, 80% in total (n=16) believe that most people in the LGBTQ+ community are not religious. Therefore, when considering sharing their religious affiliation in a majority LGBTQ+

space, religious participants walked into the interaction with the understanding that the person they would be speaking with was likely not religious, contributing to that feeling of isolation.

Another structural constraint religious participants considered before sharing their religious affiliation was the harm LGBTQ+ people experience related to religion, mapping onto the moral boundary the LGBTQ+ community draws around religious communities due to the overt and covert harm related to religion. This is considered a structural constraint because it contributes to the range of possibilities of how religious participants consider they could be perceived. For example, Michael acknowledges this harm at the idea of an imagined disclosure:

> *It is tricky because it's like the iceberg theory, you know? What you see and what people are dealing with underneath, you can't see. You can't assume anything, but I do know that religion is traumatic, is so traumatic, for so many members of the queer community because they were cast out. They were thrown out. They did not find acceptance. They were potentially, you know, basically told to convert back to not being whatever letter of the community they were and that's just traumatic for a lot of people. So, I always have a little bit of fear when it comes up among queer friends that I'm hanging out around, because I know that leads to some deep, dark history for folks, and I don't ever want to cause someone to go back to discover those emotions again.*

Michael's account suggests overt harm like conversion therapy or being kicked out of a religious group. Kylie, a white, bisexual, cisgender woman and Quaker had this to say when posed with the possibility of disclosing her religious affiliation:

> *It's less about me, too. It's more like I don't want them to have certain opinions about me when I say that- and very, very founded, warranted opinions, but I don't want them to just see me as this threat and this bigot that they've known their whole life. I want them to see*

> *me for me instead of my faith. My faith is always going to be a part of me, and if it makes*
>
> *someone else feel unsafe or threatened, I don't want to put them in that space.*

Kylie denied the own salience of her religious identity in consideration of the comfort of her fellow LGBTQ+ community members. She is focused on preserving her collective LGBTQ+ identity rather than preserving the salience of her religious affiliation in this case.

Many black congregations are discriminatory towards LGBTQ+ people (Young 2022), as supported by Jalisa's difficult and isolating experience trying to find an affirming black congregation. However, being black and disclosing religious affiliation to another black LGBTQ+ person may not be a constraint even if harm was done. The only participant to provide an account to support this was Kesha:

> *The queer black people that I know still have this underlying faith base component, but in*
>
> *the same breath, queer white people that I know shy away from religion altogether. They*
>
> *don't want anything to do with it. Even in my line of work, we do a lot of work with*
>
> *churches, a lot, and I've literally had some of our participants who are white, that would*
>
> *say, "Oh, I would come to this event if it wasn't at a church, but you guys are having it at*
>
> *a church," and I'm like, "But it's a affirming church. They, literally, are flying rainbow*
>
> *flags in the lawn," and they're like, "still not coming." But black people will be like,*
>
> *"Even better. I can come in and be my gay self and get a message." So I think because of*
>
> *the African American heritage of Christianity, it is easier for African Americans to*
>
> *identify and delve in both worlds, but for white people, maybe not so much.*

Therefore, Kesha highlights how race might be another constraint that affects the decision to disclose a religious affiliation, where it might be more threatening to preserving a collective

LGBTQ+ identity for white people, but not for black people because there is an assumption that black people have an "underlying faith based component."

Due to the concern for the LGBTQ+ people who experienced harm, religious participants shared they would only disclose their religious affiliation if it was relevant to the conversation, likely because it elevates its situational salience. For example, Mavis said "where I'm landing is that while I have no problem being known as a Christian, and that I am willing to be known as a Christian and share my faith, I'm only going to do that if I am asked and I'm not going to do that unprompted." Even for someone like Mavis, whose personal salience of being seen as Christian is high, they will only share their affiliation if it is brought up. This is true for Aris as well, even though they are not Christian: "If somebody else is Jewish or doing something Jewishness related, then I'll be like, "Hey, me too." but yeah, not usually."

There were two themes outlining the feelings people had about disclosing their religious affiliation in LGBTQ+ spaces. Some felt a sense of conviction while others were concerned. Jalisa had a sense of conviction about her beliefs:

> *I definitely feel like, for me, to have the faith that I say that I have in God, or in the*
> *universe period, I have to be strong enough to say it, or that means that I lack that faith.*
> *And so, I really didn't hesitate, or don't really have any hesitation about voicing what I*
> *believe, because I feel like that's what makes me authentic as a person and it makes me*
> *who I am. And so how can I pray if I'm not even okay to say I believe in God?*

In this example, Jalisa's personal salience overcame the structural constraints that may have discouraged sharing for the sake of preserving a collective LGBTQ+ identity in this imagined disclosure. However, most religious participants briefly suggested being concerned about

disclosing their religious affiliation. Michael expressed his concern at the thought of possibly sharing his religious affiliation:

> *It would make me so nervous. It would make me so nervous and fearful. Again, like I mentioned, I don't want to lead any other members of our community down to a place that was potentially dark and knowing that there would most likely be some very strong opinions in the mix about religion because of how it is used as a separator by others. Frankly, I would be scared to bring it up, because I would be worried a lot of folks would turn on me and question me and push in pretty hard, you know, "What? Well, why do you feel that way?" I'd be uncomfortable.*

Michael expressed not only concern for bringing up past negative experiences for people who experienced them, but also concern that his collective LGBTQ+ would be questioned for being religious due to its supposed oppositional nature with being LGBTQ+.

It is for this supposed conflicting nature that religious LGBTQ+ participants describe careful strategies about how they disclose their religious affiliation to other LGBTQ+ people. Participants either described their strategies as disclosing offhandedly or being sure not to seem like they were pressuring people to talk about it. For example, Mavis said they would "mention going to church," rather than outright saying they are Christian. Mavis also described very well why they do not want to come across as pressuring when faced with the possibility of disclosing their religious affiliation: "I'm not doing this unprompted or you know, as a way to like proselytize…I don't think that I can be the example in the way I want to be if I am always pushing my personal experiences on to people." If they come across as pushy, they risk their collective LGBTQ+ identity and a negative reaction.

Kylie provided a lived experience of what that reaction is like:

When I've mentioned it, they're like immediately on defense, and I'm [saying], "No, no, you -you don't have to believe in God." I- It does not matter. I believe God will accept you, and you're welcome to come to your own conclusions about what that means. I could also be wrong. I fully admit that, but, like I think that it's very defensive a lot of the time, and so I often just don't bring it up.

This individual who responded to Kylie's disclosure did so in a way to uphold a symbolic boundary and protect themselves from harm. Kylie went on to say that "he basically started quizzing me about my beliefs, and I think he was valid for that," showing that she acknowledges this common ground of negative experiences as well and felt interrogated as a result.

To summarize, the structural constraints that affect the disclosure of religious affiliation include the understanding that the majority of the LGBTQ+ is non-religious; religious people understanding that the queer community has experienced harm related to religion; and black queer people may be more receptive to religious LGBTQ+ people than white queer people. Related to these constraints, religious participants either felt free from them and let the personal salience of their religious beliefs allow them to have conviction and share their affiliation openly or concerned to bring their affiliation up. Religious participants said they would only disclose if the topic of religion was brought up, meaning it was situationally salient, and do so offhandedly or in a way that does not push the subject, or else risk a defensive response, likely due to boundary work the person being disclosed to is doing to protect themselves from harm. Therefore, religious LGBTQ+ participants' boundary work preserves their collective LGBTQ+ identity and protects LGBTQ+ people from remembering harm, even if this harm was usually done by people not in the LGBTQ+ community. This behavior is likely related to the "sticky

stigma" (Barton 2012: 57) of religious non-members of the LGBTQ+ community attaching to religious community members.

5.3.2 Receiving

By receiving the disclosure of a religious affiliation, non-religious respondents participate in boundary work by being able to respond in a way that supports or rejects a collective LGBTQ+ identity and being able to establish one group as better than the other in how they respond. I begin by discussing the structural constraints that affect how participants understand they would respond, how they believe they would react, and their internal feelings that they would choose not to share. I map the symbolic boundaries above onto these understandings of non-religious participants' behaviors to understand the response to the process of "coming out as religious" as a form of boundary work.

Structural constraints that would affect how non-religious participants would respond to an LGBTQ+ person telling them that they are religious include what religion it is, geographic location, and that the disclosure is not presented in a pushy way, similar to how religious participants intend their disclosure to be. All of these may maintain minor distinctions of what religious community members are included in the LGBTQ+ community. Several non-religious participants shared that their reaction and feelings would vary based on what the person's religious affiliation was. Specifically, non-religious respondents talked about how they would be more careful about what they say with Christian LGBTQ+ people. Macy explained her reason why her response would vary:

> *I feel safe with non-religious people and non-Christians. With a person that's*
> *Christian, I can be totally solid with them. However, I do tend to have a little bit*
> *of [a] holding back in conversation and not trying to say anything that's going to*

> *jar them ... I think there's a general, increased distaste for big religion, but I think*
>
> *that's mostly tied to Christianity. I think there's probably a lot of queer people*
>
> *who have a distaste for that specifically.*

There was evidence that non-religious queer people's distaste for big religion did not carry over to non-Christian traditions. For example, similar to how Aris said they "don't feel like Judaism conflicts with being queer or being trans," when Lace celebrated a Jewish holiday with one of their LGBTQ+ friends, they said "because it wasn't a Christian thing that I felt more comfortable." Therefore, the boundary work and likely the boundaries surrounding religion might be less permeable for Christian LGBTQ+ people and more permeable for non-Christian LGBTQ+ people. This means that LGBTQ+ Christians may feel more constrained in how they are perceived.

The cultural assumptions that come with geographic location are also a constraint that shape how non-religious participants respond to LGBTQ+ people disclosing their religious affiliation. These constraints seem to exist both at a national and international scale because the range of how religious community members are perceived could differ. Nationally, participants mentioned there being different responses in the southern U.S. compared to northern states. Rosaline discussed how responses might differ for an LGBTQ+ individual in these two regions after she moved:

> *It's so hard also to talk about this, because I'm living in a totally different part of the US*
>
> *now. The culture is so different, like even straight and queer people like, if you mentioned*
>
> *you're religious, they think you have a brain disease. They think that you are literally*
>
> *incompetent. They think that you [are] stupid, because to them it's this crazy, almost folk*
>
> *tale that people have made up about gods - Not that you can't be into science and God,*

> *that's [not at] all [what] this question is about - But there's definitely different*
>
> *perspectives about that up here, and it's almost a more, super liberal, very anti-God. I*
>
> *don't know. It's really interesting. So I feel like the Northern sensibilities are already a*
>
> *little bit less warm than Southern people.*

Although Rosaline views Southern LGBTQ+ people as more warm about discussing religion

than Northern individuals, Caroline, a white, queer, non-binary person, views the possibility of

disclosing in the South as risky:

> *We are in the South. So, there's a certain kind of religion that comes with being in the*
>
> *South. And so, the more people who I've seen who have been raised super- like either it's*
>
> *orthodox Judaism, or it's super conservative Christianity- Those people have a lot more*
>
> *religious trauma, which has pushed them so dramatically away from being a religious*
>
> *person.*

This is how religious trauma might shape a non-religious person's response to the disclosure.

Non-religious participants also mention how the response to disclosing religious affiliation might

differ internationally. Nik immigrated to the U.S. from Bulgaria and describes how this shapes

their imagined reaction:

> *I'd say they are more religious just because religion is something people consider as their*
>
> *identity in the U.S. Versus other places … If you have to give a demographic of yourself,*
>
> *a lot of people will think of gender, race, age, religion in the U.S. Versus other countries,*
>
> *nobody in Bulgaria will ask you, "what religion are you?"*

Therefore, the permeability and salience of boundaries may differ by region and change how

non-religious LGBTQ+ people engage in the boundary work when learning other LGBTQ+

people are religious. In some regions of the U.S. it is more contentious or common to be

religious or have experiences with religion and in some countries, the salience of religious affiliation may differ.

Finally, although it might not be a structural constraint, non-religious participants said their responses were also shaped by whether they felt pressured when talking about religion with the person disclosing. This is similar to how religious participants are intentional about not coming across this way. Lucy compared how she would respond to someone she sees as pressuring her to participate in religion as compared to someone just wanting to talk about religion:

> *To me, if someone's coming to me in good faith, and they're not trying to quote unquote, "convert me," - because that I will resist. I think you probably gathered that by now, that I will resist - But if someone's coming to me in good faith, and just wants to share what their beliefs are, I'm more than happy to have that conversation.*

Lace shared a similar perspective with a lived experience, saying "If you proselytize to me and try to convert me, which did happen a few weeks ago, It's very annoying … if there's no trying to convert me, then perfectly fine." The manner in which LGBTQ+ people share their religious affiliation does matter, because it shapes how their community members perceive them and react to them.

Now, I discuss how non-religious LGBTQ+ participants understand how they would react to another LGBTQ+ person disclosing to them that they are religious. The responses of participants are overwhelmingly positive. Rather than reflecting boundary work that differentiates to maintain a collective identity, this boundary work reflects the permeable boundaries that celebrate religious LGBTQ+ individuals as members of the community, all of which are examples of non-religious individuals doing self-effacing boundary work. Participants

also responded with surprise and curiosity or briefly acknowledged the disclosure and moved on with the conversation.

Responses included feeling happy for the person disclosing, admiring them, being supportive, and understanding. I acknowledge these may be socially desirable responses, but the discussion of negative internal thoughts and feelings later provide a sense of balance and nuance to receivers' thought processes. In the case of these themes of positive emotions, the response of this boundary work shows how the boundaries are very permeable, relating to the themes of symbolic boundaries that celebrate religious members of the LGBTQ+ community and the understanding that being religious and LGBTQ+ can cause conflict. Lace was included in celebrating a religious holiday with one of their queer friends and had this to say about it: "I was very happy that she shared that part of her with us and also just getting to know another part of her, made me feel like closer to her in that way." Rather than constituting boundary work, Lace not only felt happy for their friend, but the disclosure brought them closer together rather than further apart. Participants also expressed admiration for LGBTQ+ people who shared their religious affiliation with them because of the cultural understanding that being religious and LGBTQ+ conflict. Caroline said they would "have to commend them for keeping their identity as a person who is religious, 'cause that's really hard, I think, being a queer person." Ultimately, their initial responses were supportive and understanding. Derek's response reflects conditional support if someone were to disclose to them. They said, "I'd be supportive, you know. No need to question it unless they've made some kind of bad impression. Really, I'd have no problem with it. It would just be, you know, them sharing a piece of information about themselves." Their response is possibly related to the conditional permeability based on whether someone causes inter-community harm or if they shared their religious affiliation in a pressuring manner. Non-

religious participants were also very understanding of why an LGBTQ+ person might want to be religious despite the supposed conflict. Cara's response acknowledged that religion can still be a supportive (McCann et al 2020) and protective resource for LGBTQ+ people (Gandy et al. 2021):

> *I really understand the appeal of believing that there's always someone looking out for you, and you can have this thing, this being, that you can go to whenever you have a problem and stuff. So, if there was a way for me to trick my brain into thinking that that was, or believing that that was real, I probably also would. So, if someone else can kind of get away with that, and still like be happy in their queerness or transness, or whatever, then I would be like, "hell yeah.""*

Another response of non-religious participants related to the supposed conflict between being religious and LGBTQ+ was feeling surprised and many said they would be curious as well. Caroline talked about how this reaction has changed over time: "I've kind of moved away from this. I think a little bit is that for a long time I was just so surprised when a queer person was [saying] "Here I am! I'm at the mosque, I'm at the church, I'm at Temple, like whatever. That is just surprising to me."" A surprised response may be less durable over time. Like the surprise, and possibly related, participants were also very curious about the religious lives of other LGBTQ+ people. Macy says, "I like hearing how people get to a line of thinking and reach a conclusion, and I think faith would be an especially intriguing one for an LGBTQ+ person, because it's... I don't know, so often used negatively. So yeah, I'd be intrigued." Macy's curiosity is related to her cultural understanding that religion has caused harm to LGBTQ+ people, but her curiosity would not be critical of a religious LGBTQ+ person if they were to disclose to her. She would be curious and want to ask questions, but said "without it being a pressure … I don't want

to be like, "prove your faith to me." I don't need that." A response like Macy's would curb the feeling of being interrogated that Kylie felt when she disclosed her religious affiliation. Rosaline's curiosity is a bit more critical, not towards the LGBTQ+ person, but the religion they participate in:

> *So I also [thought], "why do you want to be back in that? Haven't you been burned?" I guess I was a little bit suspicious? … I guess I just have a lot of trust in my friends, and I know that they're doing what's right for them. So I guess I'm always just curious, and maybe a little suspicious; What's really going on?*

Some participants' reactions were the exact opposite of curious, but not hostile either. Non-religious participants tended to say they would just "move on" after the other person shared their religious affiliation. Lace had this to say in response to an imagined disclosure of "coming out as religious": "This is a part of who they are and that's it. Then, okay, great. move on." This is not to say that the religious affiliation is ignored either though. Nik said when their friend shared their religious affiliation with them, "It was more like a mental note. Like, "Oh, okay. So, that's what they do in their free time sometimes." It is something they do not simply move on and forget about, but just treat as something they now know about another LGBTQ+ person.

The outward responses of non-religious participants often did not reflect their negative internal thoughts and feelings. These were participants' "gut reactions" that they said they would not share with religious LGBTQ+ people. These internal reactions included trying to understand not everyone has bad experiences with religion, tempering negative reactions, and tempering concern for how religious LGBTQ+ people as they navigate this intersection. For example, Caden expressed a need to remind himself that, "my bad experience is not a monolith" if someone were to share their affiliation with him. This could be his process of internally breaking

down the cultural assumption that all LGBTQ+ people have common ground in having only negative experiences with religion. Stella would also actively try to break away from assumptions about religion:

I would try my hardest to withhold that surprise or judgment, even though I know that, like my gut reaction would probably be negative. But, I think that's related to how I was treated in the past by religious people, and I want to say that even though that immediate gut reaction would be negative, I would try to temper it, because I know that that gut reaction is based on being treated badly for being queer. And a religious, queer person, would [and] should theoretically not do that to me.

She would try to detach her understanding of the symbolic boundaries surrounding religious people from religious LGBTQ+ people. Stella's testament shows that her response fosters more permeable boundaries for religious LGBTQ+ people than for other religious people, enacting self-effacing boundary work in a way that includes community members, yet maintains a distinction against non-community members. While Caden tried to break away from the cultural assumption that LGBTQ+ people do not have positive experiences with religion and Stella tried to separate assumptions of religious people from religious LGBTQ+ people, Caroline still acknowledged how being LGBTQ+ and religious can conflict. They said, "I think I'd be nervous for them, just of how they would have to navigate that." Cara elaborated on this:

I can see that being a really heavy thing to process, especially if you maybe have experiences where you did come out- Not come out- You did tell another queer person or trans person that you're a Christian, and then they couldn't believe that you would be a part of such an organization or religion.

Not only would Cara express concern, but also sympathy, for people who navigate being religious and LGBTQ+, specifically in the context of the LGBTQ+ community.

In summary, the non-religious participants, on the receiving end of the process of "coming out as religious", had responses that might differ depending on the religious affiliation being disclosed, geographic location, and if the disclosure includes any pressure to participate in religion. Response to disclosure was overwhelmingly positive, reflecting the creation of purposefully permeable boundaries and the self-effacing boundary work maintaining rather than differentiating a collective LGBTQ+ identity. Participants also responded with curiosity or a brief acknowledgement of the disclosure and moved on with the conversation. Some reactions were not expressed to religious individuals though, including tempering negative reactions and suppressing cultural assumptions related to past negative experiences, and withholding concern for religious LGBTQ+ people as they navigate this intersection.

5.3.3 Valued Conversations

Ultimately, considering the perspectives of religious and non-religious participants, both expressed that they valued having these discussions about religion after a religious LGBTQ+ person disclosed their religious affiliation. For example, JC found his lived experience constructive and even playful, saying "We are in that moment, having that dialogue, kind of thing, you know? And we're also in the space to provide feedback if we're doing that or to joke around [about] it too." Lucy saw it as a possible opportunity to share experiences with one another and to be heard, even if they have different beliefs:

> *I'm more than happy to have that conversation, especially if I feel like they're [going to]*
>
> *be receptive to me sharing what my beliefs are, and we don't have to agree. But if we can*

> *make each other feel heard, I think those are the conversations that we need to have more*
>
> *of.*

In line with boundary work, both make a call to take these conversations as an opportunity to deconstruct religion and humanize other members of the LGBTQ+ community. According to Kesha, "queer religious people, I think, can look beyond the religion and see the person as opposed to people who are just religious and not queer," setting an example of how to humanize other members of the community. Lucy elaborated on how deconstructing religion can help other LGBTQ+ people achieve this, saying LGBTQ+ people should start "interrogating our beliefs within ourselves, and interrogating the ways in which those beliefs manifest in the wider world, and whether or not those beliefs can heal or harm. I think everyone has work to do. I believe in building bridges, not burning them." Both religious and non-religious participants were making an effort to create more permeability in the symbolic boundaries and preserve a collective LGBTQ+ identity for all LGBTQ+ people with self-effacing boundary work. Having these valued conversations described above may help assist in this process.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Summary

I utilize symbolic boundaries theory and boundary work to investigate how religious LGBTQ+ people are perceived and responded to in the LGBTQ+ community. Sumerau (2016) found that some LGBTQ+ Christians draw boundaries between themselves and their non-religious community members that frame LGBTQ+ Christians as more worthy of representing the community. However, this does not interrogate how non-religious LGBTQ+ people might view religious LGBTQ+ people. Below, I summarize my findings and their implications.

The content of symbolic boundaries surrounding religion differed if they were external or internal to the LGBTQ+ community. Participants drew cultural boundaries around religious groups because their conservative political values and white, cisgender, heterosexual male power structures run counter to the LGBTQ+ community's tastes. They also drew moral boundaries around religious people, seeing them as morally lesser, but some participants had a nuanced perspective and view religious people as morally good as well and have positive experiences with religion. The experiences my LGBTQ+ participants had with religion affected how permeable the boundaries between themselves and religious groups are, where some were able to enjoy affirming religious spaces while others were unable to due to their negative experiences.

Some of these boundaries surrounding religious groups followed religious LGBTQ+ people into the LGBTQ+ community by way of cultural packages. Several themes arose from a general understanding that being religious and LGBTQ+ is conflicting. Both religious and non-religious participants viewed religious LGBTQ+ people as more conservative and having a distaste for institutionalized religion because its power structure is not compatible with the LGBTQ+ community. However, non-religious participants saw religious LGBTQ+ people as

having less marginalized intersecting identities, modeling similar attributes to those in power in religious institutions. In contrast, religious LGBTQ+ participants felt very isolated because their religious affiliation marginalizes them in the LGBTQ+ community and their LGBTQ+ identity marginalizes them in their religious communities. Also related to this cultural assumption of conflict, non-religious participants see religious LGBTQ+ people as secretive about their religious and LGBTQ+ selves.

The moral boundaries in the LGBTQ+ community vary depending on which perspective is considered. Religious participants expressed concern that the "sticky stigma" (Barton 2012: 57) of being religious followed them into the LGBTQ+ community and worried they might be viewed as closed-minded or as believing they are better than non-religious LGBTQ+ people. However, non-religious participants had a different perception of the moral boundaries surrounding their religious counterparts: non-religious participants view religious LGBTQ+ people as morally greater both by being more resilient and compassionate and actively celebrate them for it.

There is a greater sense of perceived permeability of these boundaries by non-religious LGBTQ+ participants than religious participants perceive. However, a theme of both religious and non-religious participants reflected that these boundaries are permeable on the condition that religious LGBTQ+ community members can only be considered community members if they do not cause any inter-community harm.

The content of the symbolic boundaries addressed above also carry into the process of "coming out as religious" in the LGBTQ+ community. This process is understood through boundary work, which preserves collective identity by responding in a way that frames one group as better than another in some way. However, the themes gathered from my participants

highlight how symbolic boundaries surrounding religion external to the LGBTQ+ community in the form of "sticky stigmas" (Barton 2012: 57) carry into this disclosure process, but the priority to preserve an inclusive collective LGBTQ+ identity through self-effacing boundary work overcomes these stigmas.

Those disclosing their religious affiliation experience structural constraints that affect how they disclose including the low number of religious people in the LGBTQ+ community, harm related to religion, and race. Participants either felt concerned about sharing their religious affiliation due to harm related to religion and the "sticky stigmas" (Barton 2012: 57) attached to it or were convicted about sharing their beliefs. Acting with the goal of preserving a collective LGBTQ+ identity, religious participants said they would only disclose their religious affiliation in LGBTQ+ spaces if it was a topic of conversation or would do so offhandedly.

The non-religious participants on the receiving end of those sharing their religious affiliation gave responses related to how they understand the content of symbolic boundaries surrounding religion in the LGBTQ+ community. Their responses could differ depending on the religious affiliation being disclosed, geographic location, and if the disclosure includes any pressure to participate in religion. non-religious participants mostly saw themselves as responding positively to LGBTQ+ people coming out to them as religious. This reflects how permeable the boundaries are as non-religious participants understand them because they actively uplift their religious community members through self-effacing boundary work. Related to a cultural understanding that being LGBTQ+ and religious conflicts, non-religious participants responded to the disclosure with curiosity or a brief acknowledgement of the disclosure and moved on with the conversation. However, some reactions were suppressed related to negative assumptions, experiences, and concerns in the interest of preserving an inclusive collective

LGBTQ+ identity rather than allowing the "sticky stigma" (Barton 2012: 57) of being religious

to stick to their fellow community members.

     Both religious and non-religious participants are making an effort to create more

permeability in the symbolic boundaries and preserve a collective LGBTQ+ identity for all

LGBTQ+ people through deconstructing religion and humanizing fellow community members.

Having these valued conversations in the form of "coming out as religious" allows for self-

effacing boundary work to begin.

     In an applied perspective, this research highlights the ways in which marginalized

communities embrace their collective identity through self-effacing boundary work rather than

engaging in internal marginalization. This could have implications not only for the future of the

LGBTQ+ community, but by extension, other marginalized groups that already face stigma and

may also be politicized (Klandermans 2005). Forming boundaries may stifle solidarity, making

movements for social change possibly more difficult to achieve for these communities.

According to social psychology, individuals are more likely to help someone they view as having

a common identity than one without (Ellemers et al. 2000) and when that common identity is

seen as being a diverse group, this can enhance group commitment (Rink & Ellemers 2003). If

the number of LGBTQ+ people continues to grow (Jones 2022) and if more anti-LGBTQ+

legislation is proposed (Peele 2023), the LGBTQ+ community can benefit from acknowledging

the diverse religious perspectives within it. It can enhance group commitment and therefore

feelings of solidarity in the community.

6.2 Limitations

     By interviewing and asking people to recall their experiences of "coming out as

religious", I do not actively witness the interaction between the person disclosing and the person

they are disclosing to like I would if I conducted observations. So, I did not witness boundary work in action, but was able to analyze how participants understand how boundaries might influence their decision making process in retrospect or in hypothetical scenarios through an interview. Observations would also witness someone disclosing their religious beliefs in an LGBTQ+ space, which is not likely to happen based on my participants' responses and religious individuals probably prefer it be in private and with those they know and trust.

Participants may have also expressed openness to others different from them because it is socially desirable to say in an interview. This could be especially possible if the LGBTQ+ community is understood as a welcoming community as some of the participants describe. Therefore, the boundaries may be less permeable than the data reflect, but highlights what the boundaries might ideally look like based on the participant's values.

The limitations are largely related to the sample. The participants ranged from ages 20-35, were majority white, and the religious individuals were mostly Christian. Since this study focused mostly in one region due to the snowball sampling method, this does not make it generalizable to the United States. Studying in the Southern U.S. may present stronger, less permeable symbolic boundaries compared to other regions of the United States. In regards to race, a majority of inclusive Christian denominations tend to have largely white congregations (Krull 2020). So, while this research may speak more to the experience of white, religious LGBTQ+ individuals, it may not capture the results of when a third, racially marginalized identity intersects with religious and LGBTQ+ ones as clearly. The majority of religious LGBTQ+ people are also Christian (Anon 2013), meaning that the understanding of how other religious affiliations are perceived in the LGBTQ+ community may be limited.

6.3 Future Research

Future research should continue in three areas. The first is to understand the impact of the themes identified in this research. Quantitative data has the potential to measure the strength and breadth of the effects symbolic boundaries and boundary work have on well being, belongingness, and other results of feeling a part of or isolated from the LGBTQ+ community if someone is religious. Then, interventions can be implemented by LGBTQ+ organizations, mental health providers, religious leaders, activists, and other practitioners within the LGBTQ+ community to ensure a sense of community for members who need it most.

Second, future research should move forward with larger and more diverse samples. Future research could compare and contrast the permeability of symbolic boundaries in the LGBTQ+ community surrounding religion by regions of the U.S., countries, religious affiliations, racial groups, and age groups. Participants alluded to several of these, but a richer, larger data set could capture the diversity of experiences and intersections within the LGBTQ+ community that this research did not. Boundaries may be perceived as or made to be less or more permeable in these populations.

Third, future research and symbolic boundaries should continue to consider Ghaziani & Holmes' (2023) coming out process as a way to study boundary work because by collecting data from both the disclosing and receiving groups, researchers can conduct a rich comparative analysis of how boundaries are perceived by either group and how boundary work is enacted and responded to. An example of groups to look at in the future would be boundaries around groups such as democrats and republicans (Meyer & Choi 2020) within the LGBTQ+ community. To understand what stigmas carry over, comparative data could also be collected on how the LGBTQ+ community views democrats and republicans who are not community members.

6.4 Conclusion

Despite limitations and a call for future research, the boundaries non-religious members of the LGBTQ+ community draw are now better understood from both the perspectives of religious and non-religious community members. While non-religious participants already seem to be successfully thinking inclusively about their religious community members, religious participants seem to be having difficulty recognizing this due to the concern of negative stigmas surrounding religion following them into the LGBTQ+ community. I conclude this research with a quote from Stella because her feelings summarized the major takeaway of this research:

The lack of difference would be important, because it goes to show that in spite of the political environment, that religious, queer people are still queer people, like they should be there. They should be fully welcome in the community, regardless of people like myself who have a bad experience with religion. From the aspect of are they queer enough? Of course they are. Religion doesn't have any impact on that, and I think that's important. That felt cheesy, but…

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

In-person Interview Introduction and Informed Consent: "*Thank you for agreeing to be a part of our study. My name is Jay Gulick and I am a graduate student at UNC Charlotte working with Dr. Scott Fitzgerald. Today, I am interested in hearing your thoughts on religion in the LGBTQ+ community. The interview will take anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour. Because I am recording this interview, please avoid stating your name or any other identifying information. Do you have any questions before I begin recording? (**BEGIN RECORDING**).*

Have you read the consent form I gave you?

As a reminder, the purpose of this study is for research only. Your participation in our study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. All of your responses are confidential. No one other than the researchers will know what you as an individual have said. If you have any questions or concerns or would like to withdraw from this study, there is an email and phone number on the informed consent form.

Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. There are no wrong answers. Feel free to use specific examples to illustrate your answers."

General Demographic Questions:

I am going to get some general information about you first, then we can move onto the research topic. Is that alright with you?

- What pronouns do you use?

- What is your age?

- How would you describe your race?

- Are you religious or not religious?

LGBTQ+ Identity Questions [all interviewees]:

We are going to talk about LGBTQ+ identity first and then jump into religion later. I want to assure you that I will not out you and your identity will be protected. If you have any questions for me, just ask.

- How would you describe or label your LGBTQ+ identity?

- What does it mean to you to be [identity]?

- How important to you to be known as [identity]?

- Can you share with me how you came to realize you were [identity]?

- Do people often recognize that you are [identity]?

- If you have told family members that you are [identity], can you describe to me what that was like?

- Are most of the people you know members of the LGBTQ+ community?

- How would you describe your relationships with them?

- In what ways do you and do you *not* feel a part of the LGBTQ+ community?

Now, we will move onto talking about religion.

Religious Affiliation Questions [religious interviewees]:

- How would you describe or label your religious affiliation?

- What does it mean to you to be [affiliation]?

- How important to you is it to be known as [affiliation]?

- How did you come to realize you were [however they identify]?

- Do people often recognize that you are [however they identify]?

- Are you affiliated with a church or other place of worship? What is that community like for you?

- Are most of the people you know religious?

- How would you describe your relationships with them?

Experiences with Religion Questions [all interviewees]:

- Why do you identify as [religious identification/non-religious]?

- Were you raised religious? What was that like?

- Do you still affiliate with or participate in that religion?

- Can you describe some experiences you have had with religion or religious people?

- **[Question for non-religious]** Are many people you know religious? How would you describe your relationships with them?

Perceptions of Religion Questions [all interviewees]:

- What are the first descriptors that come to mind when you think of a religious person?

- In your opinion, how do most LGBTQ+ people view religion and religious people?

- Do you think there are more religious or non-religious people in the LGBTQ+ community?

"Coming Out as Religious" Questions [religious interviewees]:

- If you have done this, can you tell me about a time you told a non-religious LGBTQ+ person that you are [religious affiliation]?

- If I were to put you in a majority LGBTQ+ space, where you did not know the religious affiliation of others in the room, how would this affect your decision to tell someone there that you are [religious affiliation]?

- If you knew they were a non-religious LGBTQ+ person you, would you?

- What emotions would you feel leading up to telling them you are religious?

- What would you expect that interaction to be like?

- What stereotypes do you think there are about religious people?

- Does your religious affiliation affect you feeling a part of the LGBTQ+ community at times?

"Coming Out as Religious" Questions [non-religious interviewees]:

- If an LGBTQ+ person were to tell you they were religious, how would you respond?

- How might your reaction differ if they were someone close to you or someone new?

- In what ways do you think religious LGBTQ+ people are different from other LGBTQ+ people?

- Do you think these differences are important?

- Do you know a religious LGBTQ+ person? Can you tell me about them and how you learned they were religious?

- What stereotypes Do you think there are about religious LGBTQ+ people?

Conclusion:

- Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't talked about?

"I appreciate you taking the time to help me better understand your thoughts about the LGBTQ+ Community and religion. Thank you for participating in the study! If you have any questions or concerns, please refer to the contact information on the Informed Consent Form.
*If you know of anyone else who may be interested in participating, please send them our contact information so they can reach out." (**END RECORDING**)*